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*Henry W. Murphy.*

SANS MERCI.



# SANS MERCI;

OR,

KESTRELS AND FALCONS.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

“GUY LIVINGSTONE,” “SWORD AND GOWN,”

ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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## CONTENTS.

### CHAPTER I.

	PAGE
AT THE CROSS-ROADS . . . . .	1

### CHAPTER II.

L'ANDALOUSE . . . . .	12
-----------------------	----

### CHAPTER III.

IMPAR CONGRESSUS . . . . .	26
----------------------------	----

### CHAPTER IV.

QUID PRO QUO . . . . .	39
------------------------	----

### CHAPTER V.

BOOT AND SADDLE . . . . .	69
---------------------------	----

### CHAPTER VI.

ERUPIT . . . . .	81
------------------	----

### CHAPTER VII.

EVASIT . . . . .	97
------------------	----

### CHAPTER VIII.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END . . . . .	127
------------------------------------	-----

## CHAPTER IX.

	PAGE
A LAST CHANCE . . . . .	148

## CHAPTER X.

"WHO CHECKS AT ME, TO DEATH IS DIGHT" . . . .	159
---	-----

## CHAPTER XI.

BLOOD-MONEY . . . . .	177
-----------------------	-----

## CHAPTER XII.

SCHRECKLICH DU BIST ALLEIN . . . . .	190
--------------------------------------	-----

## CHAPTER XIII.

BLOOD-RECKONING . . . . .	211
---------------------------	-----

## CHAPTER XIV.

ICH DIEN . . . . .	225
--------------------	-----

## CHAPTER XV.

LAST STROKES OF THE SHUTTLE . . . . .	244
---------------------------------------	-----

# SANS MERCI;

OR,

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## CHAPTER I.

AT THE CROSS-ROADS.

BERTIE GRENVIL had pluck and hardihood enough to set up a dozen rough-riders: but he was rather delicate than robust of frame; and his two falls—the last of which happened just before the others forded the Swarle—had shaken him sorely. However, the fight was knocked out of the five-year-old as well: so he was content to plod away, soberly, homewards; whilst the Cherub nursed his discontent under the smoke of a colossal cigar.

“Isn’t it my luck all over? I was in rare form for going: and I suppose they’re having

the run of the season. And then—I get a mount like this. Hold up, you brute! Can't you keep your legs, even on the hard road? I wish you were mine: you should sup on an ounce of lead to-night. It would be a charity to the world, to put you out of it; you'll do some mischief yet before you die. Nice boy—that Hardress; so full of 'generous impulses,' and all the rest of it. I suppose this is his idea of 'putting a friend on a real good thing.' I wonder Cis is bothered with such a cross-grained cub: they'll part company before long, I fancy. What's that, yonder? Why, I do believe——”

The last words, spoken in a very different tone from the grumblings that preceded them, broke from Bertie's lips, just as an abrupt turn in the road brought him in sight of a mounted group; riding along in the slow, purposeless fashion of 'pursuers' who have utterly lost the hounds, and resigned themselves to their fate. All were male figures, but one. That one Grenvil knew at the first glance; though he saw not the face, but only the heavy plaits of bright fair

hair, that seemed over-heavy for the trim little head and slender neck to carry.

For one moment he drew rein; as if he would have allowed the party in front to pass on, without joining them. Then he struck his horse sharply with his heel, and pressed forward, muttering:

“What an idiot I am, and coward into the bargain! To have it over at once is the very best thing that could happen. I *can* hold my own to-day, I think; to-morrow—who knows?”

In ten seconds more, Minnie Carrington's foolish heart was beating alarums, as she welcomed the new-comer—with no intelligible words, but more significant blushes and smiles.

The damsel's father was an easy-going and something ‘wattle-headed’ elder. The details of domestic state-craft were never confided to him; he had only to acquiesce in his wife's diplomacy, and, so to speak, affix his official signature to whatever instruments she thought fit to present to him. He had not been present at the Torrcaster ball; and had neither watched

nor been informed of Minnie's misdemeanours at Charteris Royal. So, after favouring Bertie (whom he barely recognised) with a good-humoured nod, Mr. Carrington plunged overhead again into a discussion deeply interesting to himself, and another squire of his own calibre, relating to the best succession of crops for fresh reclaimed land. He never noticed his daughter dropping gradually back, till an interval of some dozen yards separated her and Bertie Grenvil from the body of the small cavalcade; nor, had he been told of it, would the knowledge have troubled his honest, unsuspecting head a whit.

The Cherub seemed strangely at a loss for conversation; so Minnie, shy, was fain to give him a lead; she did this gracefully enough, if somewhat shyly, with an allusion to Bertie's soiled coat, which bore many traces of his late mishaps.

"I can see you've had one fall, if not more, Captain Grenvil. Are you sure you're not hurt? You don't know how pale you are looking.

Won't you take the least drop of sherry out of my flask? I'm so glad it's full still."

She drew out from her saddle-bow the tiniest silver horn—not larger than Titania might have used for the storing of wild-flower dew—and held it out, with a pretty timid smile.

But Grenvil declined the proffer decisively, though very courteously: his tone was so unnaturally cold and constrained, that, listening with closed eyes, you might have thought some elderly formalist was speaking. The effort that it cost him to bear himself thus, was surely set down on the credit side of poor Bertie's moral account; it ought to balance several items in the long black column *per contra*.

"A thousand thanks, Miss Carrington. But I need not rob you. I've my own flask out, with something stronger than sherry in it, I'm ashamed to say. And I must not rob you of your pity either, on false pretences. I'm really not the least hurt; a trifle shaken, that's all. I don't fall very heavy. I'm used to tumbling, too; for I can't afford to ride clever horses, so I take

what my friends choose to lend me. They're more considerate than Hardress, as a rule, to be sure. I can't complain, either; for, bar accidents, I should hardly have come across you to-day. I didn't see you at the meet—too late, I suppose? And I should have been so sorry to have left Marlshire, without bidding you good-bye. I go at the end of this week, if not sooner."

It was plain to see that Minnie was both hurt and surprised, when her simple kindness was rejected; but the white scared look came over her face, only with Bertie's last words.

"Going—going so soon—and not coming back? You cannot mean it."

He broke in with a sort of fierce impatience, yet more foreign to his nature than the chill formality of his former manner.

"Stop: say nothing about the other night; and remember nothing either. It was a pleasant dream enough; but penniless reprobates like me have no right to be dreaming. Look here, Miss Carrington: I don't want to make myself out

better or worse than I am. If you ever think of me at all, think of me as an unlucky devil, who never had much of a chance of becoming worthy of a good woman's love; and—threw that chance away, years ago. Yes; I'm going. It's about the best thing I can do. I don't suppose we shall meet again, till long after you are married and happy; as I do hope and believe—I speak God's truth now—you will be."

She answered never a word: only by the motion of her lips, Bertie guessed that she murmured to herself the one word—

"Happy!"

And, all the while, her great brown eyes dwelt piteously on his face, till he was fain to turn his own away.

But, in spite of her girlish folly and softness of heart, there was courage in Minnie Carrington's nature. She came of a good stubborn old Saxon stock; and her pride came happily to her aid, just in time. She drove back a choking sob right bravely; and in a minute or two, was able to speak, almost as calmly as her own mother could

have wished ; only, the poor little lip would keep trembling.

“ You are quite right, Captain Grenvil. It will be far better to forget all about the other night—that is not forgotten already. Of course, you know best if you must go. Thank you, very much, for your good wishes. I daresay, I shall be as happy as my neighbours. Now, I won't tempt you out of your way ; especially after your fall. That right-hand road leads to Charteris Royal : ours, is straight on. Good-bye.”

She pointed with her whip, as she spoke. The gesture was simple and natural enough : but Bertie knew that the same thought was in both their minds, just then.

Here, their path divided for many a day—if not for evermore.

So those two parted—after a long, long hand-pressure—with scarcely more outward emotion, than if all the engagements for future waltzes, made on that unlucky evening at Charteris Royal, were to be duly and quickly fulfilled. In

certain points of stoicism some of our delicate damsels, and curled darlings, might put Sparta to shame.

The Cherub had seldom—if ever—come out of temptation with so clear a conscience as now. Nevertheless his brow was dark with discontent; and the cloud had not lifted therefrom, as he rode sharply through the park-gates of Charteris Royal. Hardress, who came to his room full of banter concerning Bertie's pleasant ride, met with a reception, that astonished if it did not disconcert that astute youth.

“Don't you trust to those velvety paws of Grenvil's”—Lionel used to say afterwards. “He can scratch as sharp as any of 'em; if he's stroked the wrong way up, at the wrong time.”

And Minnie Carrington ranged up alongside of her father, so quietly that it was some minutes before he noticed that she was there again. She was very silent during all the rest of their ride; but keener eyes than bluff Peter Carrington's might have failed to detect any sign of secret grief

in the demure little maiden's face. Of stuff like hers, good wives and mothers are made ; and she may fairly expect her full share of sober homely happiness. But she will be far advanced in blameless matronhood before she forgets the pang, that she dissembled so gallantly, that November morning.

Let us hope that the memory will teach her to be merciful to the weakness of her daughters ; so that—should one of those flourishing young bay-trees show signs of branching away—she will use the pruning-knife tenderly and sparingly.

It is very instructive to remark, how imperiously Duty to Society will assert itself, in seasons of bitterest sorrow. You must remember the Critic's stage-directions, concerning Tilburina and her Confidante ? They were right enough, so far as they went : but—trust me—there are differences, subtler than any of mere attire, between the mourning of mistress and maid.

If Elspeth or Effie, are jilted by their uncouth lovers, the poor peasant-girls may bewail their virginity, as loudly as they will ; with rending of

lint-white locks, and copious tears, and gusty sobbing. But, when Lord Thomas breaks troth, Fair Annet must play the high-born damsel even to the woeful end.

Come to my bower, my maidens,  
And dress my bonny brown hair ;  
Where'er ye laid one plait before,  
Look ye lay nine times mair.

You may hear the clear sweet 'hilt' ringing through the long vaulted gallery—faultless in melody as ever was swan-song. Soon, Annet shall ride forth, in all her brave attire—the silver horse-bells chiming blithely with 'each tift of the southern wind'—to the wedding that ought to have been her own.

And who would guess that, under the broidered bodice, throbs a heart-ache so terrible, that it will be kindly cruelty when the nut-brown bride drives the sharp bodkin home ?

## CHAPTER II.

### L'ANDALOUSE.

You see, the famous 'Pinkerton day' was of import to others besides the staunch old fox, whose death has been recorded; and fertile in other incidents besides those of flood and field.

From these last to Ranksborough, perhaps, accrued the most profit and renown. For Marion Charteris had witnessed his daring from afar, with much fear and trembling: even so, the dames who sate around Rowena may have looked down on *Le Noir Fainéant* hurling through the lists at Ashby. She did an inordinate quantity of hero-worship, in the course of the next forty-eight hours.

Marlshire was too well used to Seyton's prowess in saddle, to make a fuss about any singular instance thereof; and the Little Lady took the

thing in such a quiet matter-of-course way, that somehow, nobody thought of congratulating her. Neither did Vereker Vane reap much honour from his hair-breadth escape, (unsuccessful rashness is so very nearly ridiculous) save amongst his own subalterns ; who watched their Chief that night, with intense admiration, whilst he solaced his bruised carcase with drink copious and strong. When he next met Mrs. Ellerslie, thus spake the fair widow.

“Colonel Vane, I really think you ought to re-christen that dangerous horse of yours. His name is almost a libel as it stands. I ought to know something of the Plungers ; considering what regiment my husband commanded. In my time, they were steady respectable people, as a rule ; not at all given to violence and evil tempers ; quite models indeed, for—the light cavalry.”

And Blanche smiled a cold provocative smile ; such as may have dwelt on the lip of De Lorge's mistress, when she saw her glove plucked from the lion's den, and wist not of the insult to come.

She need scarcely have feared such requital now-a-days : men have waxed, since then, less sharp of wit, or less stout of heart.

The day following on the events chronicled above, was rather a lazy one at Charteris Royal. All the morning, people lounged or strolled about, according to their tastes or purposes : it was not till after an early luncheon that a general sally was made, to shoot some small covers just outside the gardens. It is unnecessary to say, that nearly all the women turned out as spectators ; each attaching herself to the fortunes of a particular gun.

I rather wonder that no enthusiast, of the Bright-Robotham school, has taken up his parable against this fashion ; which has taken root among us, of comparatively late years. It is so seldom that those blatant fanatics let a chance slip, of discourteously entreating a bloated aristocracy. To be sure, it is not probable that any such could have testified, from eye-witness, against the scandal.

Most shooters will own to feeling rather

nervous, the first time they have to perform before a bevy of bright-eyed critics : but, when this has worn off, a grateful dash of excitement pervades the after proceedings. Pleasant it is, to watch the interest—not to say animosity—displayed by the fair scorers ; how jealously they will claim a doubtful bird : sometimes hardly to be checked in their partisanship by such a whispered confession as—“ I didn’t shoot at it : indeed I wasn’t loaded.” Nor is their amusement spoiled, as a rule, by any squeamish scruples concerning blood-shedding. Yet to this there are certain exceptions. I had the honour, not long ago, of meeting a charming humanitarian ; who—being compelled to watch a hot corner—attached herself to the very worst shot of the party (he has carried missing to an incredible pitch of perfection) ; upon the principle that, “ she didn’t like to see anything killed.”

Will you fancy the poor gentleman’s face, if you please, listening to those frank and simple words ?

On the present occasion the guns outnumbered the scorers ; so that these last were fain to

distribute themselves as discreetly as they could. The head-keeper knew his business right well; and—knowing his men too, for the most part—posted them accordingly. The first line was formed about forty yards from the edge of the cover: further back still, was a rear-guard of four; in this stood Ranksborough, Seyton, Castlemaine, and Dorrillon.

For the first two, you may guess who scored. Lady Alice Langton took Cecil in charge; Sir Marmaduke, strange to say, was waited on by—his own wife.

Yet it was not so strange, after all. Flora looked with an artist's eye on all feats of physical strength or dexterity: it did not amuse her, a whit, to watch clumsiness or incapacity at work. So, when Vincent Flemyng avowed that—‘he only took a gun, for the form of the thing,’—she gave him up for the nonce, without hesitation; and came to watch her husband's performance; just as she might have watched some skilful billiard-player.

Sir Marmaduke's triumph was almost painful.

to witness. His worn face lighted up, and his sunken eyes flashed out; and his bent shoulders straightened themselves gallantly; till you began to realise what manner of man *le beau Dorrillon* of the Regency must have been. His hands trembled so at first, that his loader nearly offered to relieve him of his gun. But he soon collected himself. Though he had all his life been a famous performer, he never shot more superbly. Every minute he waxed more chirping and cheerful; till at last, he chuckled gleefully.

“Look at that cock, my lady”—he would say. “He’s a *leetle* too high for John Charteris; but just about *our* distance, I fancy.”

And down would tumble the rocketeer, yards behind them, with the dull heavy thud of a bird that leaves its life in the air.

But all the four in that rear-ward rank were artists; and each man was shooting his very best, though without a particle of jealousy. The veteran head-keeper—not usually lavish of praise—was wont to be almost enthusiastic whilst speaking of that afternoon’s work.

"It were about the neatest practice, that ever I see. Squire Seyton had a trifle the best of it; the wind turned 'em a bit his way. But Sir Marmaduke ran him main hard. And warn't the old gentleman pleased, neither?"

"'A pretty show, Woodgate,' he says to me, just arter we'd got thro' the Round Clump—'a very pretty show. And, Woodgate—her ladyship hasn't paid her footing yet; we always do it in our country.'

"And he slips something into my hand: blessed if it warn't a ten-pun note! We've had a Dook or two here in my time, and lords as plenty as blackberries. But none on 'em ever came down as handsome as that. He's a rare good sort, is the baronet; and there ain't many of 'em can touch him, though he *du* stick to muzzle-loaders. And as for my lady—I never see the woman yet that was fit to hold a candle to her, for looks."

John Charteris rejoiced, in his stolid fashion, that his covers had well maintained their reputation; taking not the faintest credit to himself for

the sport that had been shown. On the whole, the afternoon proved satisfactory to all concerned; with, perhaps, the single exception of Flemyng.

Though everyone seemed to be too busily engaged to notice his individual performance, Vincent was conscious of having burnt an absurd amount of powder, with no results worth speaking of. Therefore he was possessed with the vague envious discontent, common even among novices. Without being himself vain-glorious, or having made boast beforehand, it is not agreeable to serve as a palpable foil to the excellence of others. Besides this, he was tantalised unendurably by Lady Dorrillon's bearing towards him. To say that he had not gained an inch of ground since her hand touched his lips, is nothing. He had literally not been allowed to murmur a single confidential word in her ear, during the last twenty-four hours. She had contrived to evade him, without any marked avoidance, or expressed warning; and this state of things seemed likely to continue.

When the party went back to the house, Flora

retreated to her own rooms; and did not show again, till just before dinner was announced. Her dress and ornaments were always in perfect taste, but that night they chanced—if chance it were—to be specially becoming to her peculiar style. As she swept up the long state drawing-room, more than one eye noted this, that had long been familiar with her beauty. Even Hardress' thin sluggish blood was slightly stirred, as her rustling skirts brushed his foot in passing.

"She is infernally handsome"—he muttered.

A coarse epithet: yet perchance, there was more truth in it than the speaker was aware of.

All through dinner Flemyng sate like one in a trance; with his eyes riveted on Lady Dorrillon, who sent back no answering signal. He talked a good deal in a fitful random way; and ate a morsel or two, now and then. All the while he was drinking deep—very unusually so for him; for intemperance was not one of Vincent's vices. Yet the liquor did not seem to have any effect on his brain. Though his blood was boiling, his face grew paler, if anything, instead of flushing.

He had never in his life, been so ripe for any kind of mischief, as when he rose, with the other men, to join the women in the drawing-room.

Here, again, he was foiled, so far as any attempts at love-passages were concerned. The places near Lady Dorrillon were so fully occupied, that without absolute rudeness, he could scarcely have made his way to her side. Just when Flemying thought he saw an opening, Flora rose—with the resigned air of one who thinks it less trouble to yield, than to resist long pleading—and moved indolently towards the open piano.

A murmur of satisfaction ran audibly through the room; for her talents, vocal and musical, were of a very rare order; and perhaps were more valued, from their being so seldom exercised. But the lady was in a specially benevolent humour that evening. Though she indulged her audience with no 'show-piece' whatever—the *bravura* was her mortal aversion—her lithe fingers discoursed strangely sweet music as they strayed dreamily over the keys; and her glorious voice thrilled through every

ear that listened, as it rose and fell in the cadences of some quaint ballad, or ancient serenade.

At last, after a brief pause, she struck a few brilliant chords, and suddenly, as if moved by some reckless impulse, dashed into the opening verse of *L'Andalouse*.

Avez-vous vu dans Barcelone,  
Une Andalouse au sein bruni ?  
Pâle, comme un beau soir d'automne ?  
C'est ma maîtresse, ma lionne,  
La marquesa d'Amäegui.

Few that have heard that famous song worthily rendered, will ever be likely to forget it. I think it stands unmatched for weird passionate melody; whilst over all there lies an ominous shadow, like a black veil drawn across a scarlet vestment; somehow we feel that the romance needs must come to an evil ending, even if the love won at the sword's point be not cut short by the dagger.

It was an expurgated version that she sang, for several words were altered, and two verses left out. Nevertheless, with all her daring, Lady

Dorrillon would scarcely have ventured on it in a mixed society. Here she was tolerably sure of not scandalising her audience, though she could hardly have reckoned on taking them so completely by storm. Truly, as the last of the rich full notes died away, there were not many pulses in that room that kept regular time. Even Tom Seyton, to whom French and Hebrew were about the same, felt his honest brown face flushing; and John Charteris, in the midst of a most interesting agricultural controversy, utterly lost the thread of his argument. But Kate—as little of a prude as any woman alive—looked nervously distressed; and Lady Alice Langton's clear blue eyes rested on the songstress in cold disapproval, not unmingled with disdain.

Needless to say that the malcontents were quite unnoticed amidst the general applause; very seldom, indeed, in modern society would you see or hear such natural enthusiasm as prevailed for several minutes in the state drawing-room of Charteris Royal.

Lady Dorrillon took it all with remarkable

coolness, and was firm in her refusal to touch another note; but she could never fairly extricate herself from the group of her admirers till the appointed hour came for the women's retiring.

If indifferent hearers were so strongly moved, you may guess how it fared with Vincent Flemmyng. Such a tumult of passion as was seething within him just then it would not be easy, nor perhaps profitable, to paint in black and white. The Seytons went back to Warleigh that night, for Tom had home engagements on the morrow. Kate actually started as her brother's hand touched her own when they parted: it was hot and hard as half-cooled metal: yet quickened with a sort of convulsive tremor. She was going to speak warningly and anxiously; when Vincent broke abruptly away, as if determined to avoid any parley or question. She was very near taking counsel of Tom during their long homeward drive; but he was too sleepy to make an agreeable confidant. They had both seen that all danger from Marion Charteris was

over; and Kate had not the heart to tease her husband, just at present, with any fresh misgivings. Besides, since Vincent's return, it had become only too plain that he meant to go his own wilful way, without let or hindrance from his nearest and dearest.

## CHAPTER III.

### IMPAR CONGRESSUS.

WHEN Flemyng went to his own chamber, he had no intention of joining the other men in the smoking-room. But before he had been there five minutes, he felt that any company would be better than his own: in his present frame of mind solitude and silence were simply unendurable; so he changed his dress quickly, and descended to the *tabagie*.

"That's rather lucky"—Hardress said, as Vincent entered. "Here's a fifth, at all events; though the Commissioner has gone to bed with a head-ache. We needn't play the set rubber, that you hate so much, Castlemaine. It will do very well: the outsider's sure to have his bet. You won't mind fives and ponies, Flemyng?"

Vincent could almost have embraced the

speaker. The counter-excitement of high-play was the only anodyne that could possibly touch the morbid irritation of his nerves : it was the very one he would himself have sought : besides, he had not had a real 'flutter' for months ; and the gambling-thirst was strong upon him. So he assented eagerly ; and the rubber began at once : Ranksborough and Grenvil making up the table.

John Charteris betook himself to his rest, so soon as he had seen his guests comfortably settled to their play, with all manner of drinks ready to their hand. The worthy man never in his life wagered more than silver, on any one event (you may see him at Hombourg sometimes, putting down a five-franc piece after intense calculation, with much wrinkling of brows) ; but large sums have been lost and won under his roof, if not in his presence, without his steady-going conscience being troubled a whit. The luck went tolerably evenly for awhile : far too evenly to satisfy Flemyng, whose spirit still chafed fiercely within him ; though it must be

owned that other passions began rapidly to give place to the meaner lust of gold. Yet he won steadily, if not largely.

With the exception of Castlemaine, who was nearly first-class, they were very fairly matched. Hardress played wonderfully for his years; carrying, as might be expected, *finesse* to a fault: Flemyng's was a showy third-rate game; though he was apt to sacrifice his partner's hand to his own: the other two were a shade worse than he, when they paid attention to the cards; which was not always.

At last Flemyng cut with Castlemaine: their adversaries were Hardress and Ranksborough: the two former having the deal.

Now, if ever, seemed to Vincent the time to 'plunge.' In point of play he certainly had the best of it (for Castlemaine was a tower of strength); and, so far, the cards had stood to him very steadily. Besides, though all idea of rivalry was dead, he hated the dark languid face over against him as bitterly as ever. The two had scarcely exchanged a dozen words; and these of

the most trivial import: but overt insolence would have been a lighter aggravation, than Ranksborough's cool fashion of putting the other quietly into the background; if he did not absolutely ignore his presence. Flemyng knew that the impassible serenity, which in himself was artificial if not affected, was an integral part of Denzil's nature: he envied him this, no less than the bodily prowess and reckless courage, that were ever ready at need. There was as much of personal pique, as of the gambling spirit, in his challenge.

"Wait a second, Mr. Castlemaine: don't turn up, yet. I've a fancy on this rubber; and I'll take any bets that are offered."

"Not a bad fancy either"—Hardress said, with a sneer. "You've got the deal, and one of the best players in Europe as your partner. I can't gratify you with level money: I'll take a shade of odds though."

Now Ranksborough was by no means an habitual gambler; but he had periodical fits of high play; and in one way he was especially danger-

ous : a 'pony,' coming out of his listless lips, sounded just like a 'fiver' out of another man's. Of this peculiarity in his opponent Vincent was not aware, so that he was rather taken aback by Denzil's quiet rejoinder.

"If you want to gamble, Mr. Flemyng, I won't baulk you. Hardress may do as he likes. I'll lay you an even 'monkey' on the rubber; and lay or take the odds to the set: that is five hundred to two, of course. Will that suit you?"

If any other man alive than Ranksborough had spoken, Flemyng—even in his present temper—would assuredly have hesitated; if he had not declined the bet altogether. As it was, he closed with it at once. Cis Castlemaine made no observation; only arching his thick grey eyebrows, meaningly.

"I suppose you won't care for any more?" the Cherub murmured meekly, behind Flemyng's shoulder. "If you do, there's my humble fifty. I rather fancy the others this time."

"Yes, I'll take it;" Vincent said—having

once taken the 'header' he was utterly desperate. "Then you won't have anything in, Hardress?"

"Well; I suppose I must have a level hundred, if you won't lay odds —" the other grumbled. "Why don't you ask Castlemaine if he'd like to have some of it. You seem to be pretty greedy this time."

"Don't trouble yourself about me —" Cis answered, gravely. "And don't apologise, Mr. Flemyng. I never alter my stakes, as Lionel ought to know by this time. We're about as much as we can carry, I think. Shall I turn the card?"

It was an honour: Vincent held two more on his own hand, and they won the first game right off.

"I've the privilege of laying the long odds then—" Flemyng said, with a feverish gaiety that was not all assumed: he really did feel very confident. "Hardress; you'd better have a hundred to forty."

The boy shook his head sulkily: but Bertie—

infected with the gambling-virus, and facile as usual before temptation—‘jumped on’ and booked the bet.

Now, by one of the curious coincidences that happen only at cards, the second hand was almost a counterpart of the first.

Vincent held the knave, and four more trumps. If he had only gone off with that suit, the game was over: he would have led through king, second, on his left, up to Castlemaine’s ace and queen. True: he had not a powerful playing hand; yet he might have given his partner credit for *something*. But one of the weakest—if not the worst—points in Flemyng’s character was this: he never could trust either friend or foe. So he led off with his own strongest suit, which was trumped by Hardress, the second round: Castlemaine, at length, was forced to lead up to the king; and the critical fifth trick was just barely saved.

“A very close thing—” mutters Bertie Grenvil; drawing a long breath. “Too close to be pleasant.”

The others were silent, till Flemyng said,

“I ought to have led trumps : there’s no doubt of it.”

He looked at his partner as he spoke ; but the latter answered never a word, till Vincent repeated the question pointedly. It has been before stated that Castlemaine’s manner — especially towards men whom he favoured not — was somewhat solemn and formal.

“It has been computed—” he said, very slowly — “that eleven thousand Englishmen, once heirs to fair fortunes, are wandering about the Continent, in a state of utter destitution, because— they would not lead trumps, with five, and an honour, in their hands.”

The ultra-judicial tone of the reply would have been irresistibly comic at any other time ; now, only Hardress’s jarring laugh was heard. At any other time, too, it is probable that Flemyng would have taken offence at being so sharply schooled. But—he was dealing at the moment — he was over-borne by that faint nervous

shrinking which often comes before great disaster; like the cold 'sough' that brings the black rain-cloud down apace.

The presage was very quickly fulfilled. "Whist seldom forgives—" they say; and on this night, the rare indulgence was not to be shown. Thenceforward, Castlemaine or his partner, scarcely held a winning card: the others landed the long odds, without the semblance of a struggle.

For several seconds after the deciding trick was played, Flemmyng sat like one stunned, or dreaming. A dull heavy droning filled his ears; and the figures round the table seemed blurred, and distorted, and unnaturally large. At last, he began to realize that some one was talking about 'points;' and he broke out into a short unnatural laugh. As if points could possibly signify! Then he heard Ranksborough's deep monotonous voice, asking—

"If he wished to have his revenge?"

Of course he did! Could there be a question about it? As they sat.

Then Castlemaine spoke—very gravely, but not unkindly now :—

“ If you would like my advice, Mr. Flemyng, you would accept your losses, for to-night— heavy as they are; and claim your revenge, to-morrow. I tell you fairly; I don’t think you are in form just now, for playing such stakes. It don’t matter much to Ranksborough, or Hardress, whether they win or lose. But it’s different with you and me. We’ve got the money against us, if not the talent; and that weight *will* tell. If you are bent on going on, I’ll do my best to pull you through, I need hardly say. But I shall play the points only, with no bet on the rubber; and this must be the last. I can’t afford to be Quixotic; and I have lost already as much as I care to lose.”

Though Cis did not like, or even greatly compassionate, his unlucky partner, he really did mean well by his warning.

You may guess how much it availed. Flemyng went in again, with a blind savage energy: his bets with Ranksborough and Grenvil were the

same as before, but with Hardress they were more than trebled. That keen wolf-cub was only too ready to claim his share of the 'real good thing' that he now scented on the wind.

The result may easily be imagined: indeed, it never was practically in doubt. The second rubber was won by Ranksborough, much more easily than the first; the only difference being, that the short, instead of the long odds were landed.

But on this occasion Flemyng betrayed an extraordinary discomposure. From the moment that he knew, with the gambler's unerring instinct, that this second loss was inevitable, a sort of numbness possessed him: he felt no shock or pain when the deciding blow was dealt. Neither did he try to induce his adversaries to give him another chance of retrieving himself. Indeed he showed so much calmness and temper, whilst adding up and verifying the scores, that every man present thought better of Flemyng from that moment—saving always, Lionel Hardress; who, as he turned away to light a last cigarette,

might [have been heard to mutter, discontentedly—

“Takes it a d—d sight too coolly. Shouldn’t wonder if we had to wait for our money.”

But the amiable Tout was all abroad in his suspicions ; Flemyng did fully intend to meet his engagements ; though he had lost enough that night to cripple, if not to beggar, him for life. Therefore it did him the more credit, that he was enabled to preserve that outward serenity till Grenvil had bidden him good-night, at the door of his own chamber, with a few words of really sincere condolence ; and he was fairly locked in.

Then there came a re-action which—for the honour of manhood—shall not be described here.

When the paroxysm had spent itself, Vincent felt so unutterably weak and weary, that he only cared to sleep : sleep at all hazards, or at any price, he would have. He took morphine out of a travelling-case that held six small phials ; and infused some in water, with a hand that trembled overmuch for safe medicining.

“It don’t matter—” he muttered, when he lost count of the drops as they fell. But the quantity chanced to be only sufficient to cast him into a deep dreamless slumber, which lasted till nearly noon.

## CHAPTER IV.

QUID PRO QUO.

THE sun broke bright and clear, through the half-drawn curtains, as Flemmyng woke ; a cloudless winter sun, such as would tempt almost any man out, to hard or healthy exercise afield. But Vincent only turned away his heavy eyes, with a curse. Nearly the same syllables had been last on his lips when sleep overcame him. His brain was confused at first ; but, soon, the full memory of last night's disaster came back with that quick, sickening rush, that all thorough-paced gamblers must have known, twice or thrice in their time. He stretched out his hand, and took up a scrap of paper, lying on a marble table close to his bed ; one glance at the figures written thereon seemed quite enough : he buried his head in the pillow with a shudder and a groan.

Nevertheless, Flemying felt the necessity of bestirring himself. It would never do, for people to think that his losses had unmanned him; lying helpless there would not help him to pay them; neither would ruin be made lighter by ridicule. So he rang his bell, and proceeded to make a careful toilette, with decent outward composure; first bracing his nerves with a cup of black coffee, and a refresher of unusual potency.

After that same morning-draught, Vincent's ideas were turned into another channel; and, ere long, the remorse of the night was well-nigh swallowed up in the doubts of the morning. He began to think—how Flora Dorrillon would take all the news which she was sure to hear sooner or later, if she had not done so already? He felt quite sure of her pity; moreover, he cherished some vague hope that the gravity of his disaster might give him a certain grandeur in her eyes; and perchance she might set down his desperation to the right cause. It happens not to every one to risk such a stake as he had lost; and there must be an end to a run of ill-luck, after all; be-

sides, the proverb about Love and Play does, at odd times, come true. It was very like the man—wilfully to ignore the fact, that the first great *coup* was lost entirely by his own fault, and that Fortune had not been cruel, till her favours had been cast away.

However, a certain amount of self-delusion, aiding his overweening self-conceit, brought Flemyng into a tolerably confident frame of mind again. He resolved to try conclusions, in earnest, with Lady Dorrillon, that day. If he could only checkmate, or even bring her into a great strait, he felt that he could accept almost cheerfully the losses at the other game.

Stronger evidence of Flora's witchery could scarcely be found than in the dominion she had established over such a nature as this. Shallow, selfish, unstable, to a degree—Flemyng was yet as thoroughly engrossed by his guilty passion, and as capable of sacrificing all earthly considerations thereto, as the most heroic mortal that ever has given up heart and soul to a blameless honourable love.

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When his servant had left the room, Vincent unlocked his despatch-box, and took a small packet from a secret drawer.

“She wants proof, does she?” he said, between his teeth. “She shall have it, by G—d. What an idiot I was not to have thought of this trumpery before.”

He thrust the papers hastily into a breast-pocket; and went down-stairs straightway, for the luncheon-gong was even then sounding.

He found that all the men, with the exception of Colonel Langton, and De Visme (whose suppressed gout was still troublesome) had gone forth a couple of hours before to shoot a distant cover. There was nothing extraordinary in this. Though so much had been done over-night, it had not been a specially late sitting; nor were its incidents likely to affect any one strongly, save the principal loser. None of those concerned, with the exception of Hardress, were particularly merciless or uncharitable. Living the life they did—it was much the same with them, as with those who rode in front of the famous ‘Quarterly’

run with the Quorn : their best friend might be in desperate grief, on their left or right, but—‘the pace was too good to inquire.’ Neither were any of last night’s winners likely to be garrulous ; about good or evil fortune betiding themselves or others.

Nevertheless, as Vincent made his morning salutations, with a very fair grace, he felt perfectly certain that nearly every woman present was aware of his unprosperous ‘plunge.’ Marion Charteris’ manner was much kinder than it had been of late (for a coldness had undoubtedly sprung up between them) : in Alice Langton’s earnest gaze there was a sort of compassionate curiosity ; and Flora Dorrillon’s eyes were eloquent enough to satisfy even Flemyng, as she beckoned him to a place at her side, murmuring, as their fingers met—

“How *could* you be so rash? I’m really ashamed of you.”

Now all this was rather comforting than otherwise ; and Vincent’s moral barometer began to rise rather rapidly. He consumed a very fair

portion of the dainties set before him ; and talked a little, in the calm subdued tones of one supporting some wholly undeserved misfortune, with constancy.

As they rose from luncheon, a low vibrating voice, just discreetly avoiding a whisper, said in his ear—

“I mean to do the gardens thoroughly this bright afternoon. Would you like to play *cicerone* ? You must know the ground so well. You *would* like it ? Then, you might meet me in the lower conservatory.”

Thither Flemyng betook himself, in much perturbation of spirit it must be owned. Now that the opportunity he had sought so eagerly was certainly near, he did not feel quite sure whether he were glad or no. Those unhappy ‘nerves’ of his were always asserting themselves, just at the wrong moment.

Whilst he waited at the trysting-place, his heart kept beating with a quick irregular throbbing that was physically painful ; and he was forced to throw away a cigarette, before it was a quarter

consumed ; the smoke fairly choked him. But he waited not long, before Lady Dorrillon appeared on the topmost of the three flights of steps leading down from the upper to the lower conservatories.

Perhaps, in all her life Flora had never looked more perilously tempting than she did at that moment, when after a moment's hesitation, she came down the marble stairs, swiftly, but with no unbecoming haste ; never losing that strange undulating motion that—with other attributes—certain women have stolen from the Serpent.

Her attire, too, was so artistically chosen, from the trim hat almost smothered in soft grebe's plumage, down to the channelled heels of the wonderful balmorals — serviceable, though so daintily wrought.

No fault to find in that outer garment, of blackest velvet trimmed with blue fox-fur—just the patrol-jacket for the Life-Guards of an Amazonian Queen ; nor in those braided festoons of violet *moire*, looped up over a quilted silken kirtle to match : no fault, certainly, with those delicate

hosen, of the same colour, somewhat lighter in hue ; whose brilliant 'clocks' throw into ravishing relief the symmetry of the exquisite ancle, whereof we catch liberal glimpses from our station below.

It was just the figure, in whose fore-shortening poor John Leech would have revelled ; and to which no other could render justice. Not in this generation, I think, shall the painter arise, able to wield the pencil that dropped from those deft fingers, all too soon.

Vincent's nervous hesitations were cured instantly and efficaciously as faintness is cured by a draught of some rare cordial. Before the lady reached his side, he was ready to dare to the uttermost, rather than leave his fate any longer in abeyance. When Flora asked him—with a mischievous smile—'if he was not almost tired of waiting?' he felt so strongly tempted to snatch the slender fingers (whose grey-kid casing just showed beyond the border of a distracting little muff) and wring them hard, by way of answer, that a vague fear of making himself prematurely

ridiculous, was scarce enough to deter him. He did refrain himself, however; and they had walked some steps into the keen outer-air before Flora spoke again, in a graver tone than Vincent had ever heard her use.

“Would you mind telling me all that happened last night? Indeed I don’t ask from mere curiosity. I felt sure something had gone wrong when you did not appear at breakfast; and I asked Lord Ranksborough. He only said in his slow, listless way—how I hate it!—that ‘the secrets of the smoking-room were sacred.’ Afterwards, I got Bertie Grenvil to confess that there had been some very heavy whist, and that you were the chief sufferer. But he would not tell me, how much you had lost. Will you?”

He named the amount with an indifference that did him credit: possibly, it was not all acted: at that moment, money-troubles might have seemed to him of no more account than floating thistle-down.

Lady Dorrillon could not repress a slight start.

“So much as that?” she murmured. “What fearful rashness! I am so very, very sorry. And so will Marion be, when she knows it. Only fancy—its happening under *her* roof!”

Thus far, Flemyng had been walking with his eyes bent steadfastly downwards: he raised them now; and looked Flora in the face, with unwonted courage.

“We had better leave Mrs. Charteris’s name out altogether: don’t you think so? I can’t pretend to care much for her compassion. But I am very glad, *you* are sorry. You ought to be—a little. I should never have been so mad, if you had spared me ten kind words—ay, or even ten kind looks—all through that weary yesterday.”

She laughed her own low musical laugh, that could rob even sarcasm of its sting.

“I wonder if there is any earthly mischance or misdemeanour, that men will not lay on our poor frail shoulders. Mine ought to be bowed with their burden.” (How shapely looked their statuesque slope just then!) “I thought it was only prudent and proper, to stand on ceremony a

little, after our long *tête-à-tête* ride. One must sacrifice to conventionality now and then, you know. But I had no idea of the sacrifice turning out so costly—if it was really as you say. It is hard to believe it though, that it was *all* my fault.”

“Don’t suppose I mean to reproach you,” he answered hurriedly. “Or, if I did, when I spoke of being desperate, I was complaining of the cause—not the effect: that’s not worth a second thought. ‘Hard to believe.’ Ah! if I could only make you less hard of belief, I could forget worse ruin than fell on me last night.”

“And suppose I wanted to be convinced?”—the sweet earnest voice said. “It is rather tiresome—being always on one’s guard. I told you frankly, the other day—too frankly of course—why I could not listen. You have done nothing since to shake my scruples, or prejudices, or pride: the name matters nothing.”

“I had little opportunity,” Vincent retorted. “But I own I was stupid enough, not to think, till this morning, of the weapon that lay close to

my hand. I feel no shame in using it. I don't know what shame means where *you* are concerned." (That last romantic limitation was rather useless.) "Will you halt here for five minutes? It will not take you longer to test my sincerity."

They had turned several angles of thick evergreen shrubbery; and were now in a path rarely frequented, albeit sunny and pleasant enough; for it led, away from the flower-beds and more attractive part of the plaisance, towards a side-gate into the walled gardens. The spot was absolutely screened from any windows in the house; and about as safe a one as could have been chosen for out-door confidences.

Vincent Flemyng laid one hand, not overlightly, on the slender wrist, where it issued from the fur; with the other he drew from his breast-pocket, the packet that you saw him place there.

"You doubted how far my *liaison* with Marion Charteris had gone," he said. "Will these convince you? As I hope to be saved—bah!

that's a weak oath—as I hope to win *you*—there is every line she ever wrote me. You may look over the others at your leisure: you'll find none like that one, with the Genoa post-mark; and on that one I'm content to rest my cause."

Flora Dorrillon would not have been so dangerous a creature, if, to her strong passions and wayward recklessness, had not been added a rare power of self-control: not more than thrice, perhaps, in her life had this failed her, when its exercise was needful to save her credit, or cover her retreat. Nevertheless, it cost her no slight effort now, so to discipline her face, as to prevent the betrayal of any outward satisfaction or triumph. The coolest of chess-players might be excused for showing a tempered exultation after the winning of a difficult match; wherein all his combinations had worked on in smooth unison towards the complete final victory.

Flora's quick eye lighted on the Genoa post-mark, even before Vincent disengaged that letter from the rest: but she did not open the enve-

lope; and stood for a full minute, as if irresolute how to act.

“It’s almost a shame to read Marion’s confessions. I could not do so—with you standing by. It seems so—I hardly know what it seems. Yet I did bring this on myself, I own.”

“I’ll take all the blame, now and hereafter,” Vincent broke in. “Only *do* read. You can’t refuse, after what you said. It would be such cruel trifling.”

She smiled demurely and deprecatingly.

“I should be no woman, if I held out longer. Any other temptation than curiosity, please; and curiosity about one’s best friend’s failings! I will read a few lines; just to keep you quiet—you are so terribly impetuous to-day. But I can’t possibly do so, unless you set my unhappy wrist free. Thanks: that is better. Now, point out the passages I am to look at; and then turn your head away.”

Vincent did as he was bidden, duteously. Otherwise, he might have been somewhat puzzled by the varying expression of his companion’s

face, as she studied—or affected to study—the record of Marion Charteris’ folly. There was the strangest mingling, or swiftest succession, of careless pity, and mischievous amusement.

“I won’t keep you in suspense,” she said, at last. “If that is the worst of the ‘pieces of accusation,’ the verdict of the court is—‘Not guilty.’ I believe that it *is* the worst. I’ll just glance at the rest of the notes—*l’appétit vient en mangeant*, you know—when I am alone. Every scrap shall be burnt to-night: you will trust me thus far? So you have leave to plead; and I am bound to listen. I don’t promise, that you will prevail. The world has said some hard things of me; I don’t think it ever said, that I was easily won. But you shall have a fair field, without let or hindrance from others: and thereto I plight my troth.”

She held out her gloved right-hand with an imperial grace—there is queenliness even in coquetry—and accepted the homage of Flemyng’s lips thereon, without a shadow of coyness or embarrassment. But, under the rain of passionate

acutely, nor have answered more becomingly, than he ; though his tone might have been less sullen and cold.

“ I guess what you mean, of course. It pains me exceedingly to be obliged to refuse your first request, or reject your first advice. I am just as grateful as if I had accepted both. But I have no choice but to decline. If I could act otherwise, I should be still more unworthy of you than I am. No : I am not yet come so low, that I should borrow, even from *you*, to pay my debts of honour.”

He spoke sincerely enough ; yet it is probable that he felt a certain pride in her self-denial ; and, as it were, wrapped himself in dignity, as he delivered his *tirade*. If so, he must have been sorely disconcerted by the manner of its reception. There was no anger in Lady Dorrillon’s face ; but a disdain, so intense, that it well-nigh verged on pity.

“ Is not that like a man,” she said in a bitter suppressed voice—“ the real conventional man, of our good nineteenth century ? You would move

heaven and earth to compass my dishonour, if not my ruin in the world's eyes ; and accept that sacrifice, freely. But you scruple about accepting a kindness that I would offer to Bertie Grenvil or any other old friend, just as readily as I offered it to you. Deep self-devotion—is it not ? —to ask you to use two or three of the thousands that I have not a notion what to do with, till I may happen to want them ? And that is your idea of love. Will you hear mine ? Any woman, worthy of the name, would give the bracelets from her wrists and the rings from her fingers, to be staked at the hazard-table ; if Play were her only rival ; and her lover would not think her less beautiful without her jewels. Ah me—only to know such love as that—*again !*”

Lower and lower her voice had sunk, till the last word was utterly lost in a long passionate sigh ; and the speaker turned hastily away, hiding with one hand her averted eyes. Truly, there was wondrous little of acting here.

It is not hard to imagine how this sudden outbreak of emotion affected Vincent Flemyng, who had never dreamt of the like as possible in his haughty mistress. The incoherent string of protestations and excuses which he poured forth with feverish volubility, is certainly not worth transcribing. Of course, he accepted everything, with blind submissive gratitude.

“He would do anything she wished, if she would only,” &c., &c.

Lady Dorrillon recovered her composure before the wordy torrent was in mid-course: she did not interrupt the orator till he was fairly out of breath; but she would not allow a fresh flood-gate to be opened.

“That is enough. I don’t want you to ‘swear by earth and sea and sky,’ but only to be reasonable and amiable. I’m so glad it is settled so. It is a real pleasure to be able to help you; and there need not be the slightest difficulty about it. I will tell you what to do in the course of the evening. And don’t be so rash again. You have not the same excuse, you

know. Now, you shall take me in. I am not equal to lionizing all the gardens to-day: for I am tired already."

In truth Flora did look strangely pale; so much so that Flemyng dared not attempt to dissuade her from returning: moreover he himself felt as if he would fain be alone to think over all that had been said and done. So they strolled slowly and somewhat silently homewards; parting where they had met, in that convenient nook of the lower conservatories.

An hour or later, Mrs. Charteris—coming in from a walk, during which she had taken occasion to exhibit a wonderful new dairy—was summoned to Lady Dorrillon's apartments.

The vast room was in semi-darkness; for there was only one shaded reading-lamp, on a table close to the sofa, on which the lady was reclining. There was a lassitude in the *pose* that struck Marion at once; for Flora, though intensely indolent, was never languid.

"You're not ill, darling?" Mrs. Charteris asked, eagerly.

“Not ill,” Flora said. “Only rather weary. One gets tired sometimes with working the puppet-show—sick of the very sight of buckram and wood and wire. But all’s well that ends well. And the labourer is worthy of his hire. And—I can’t think of any other proverb just now. When Mr. Flemyng publishes his life and correspondence—as I suppose he will some day—he must leave your letters out, *ma mignonne*; or quote from memory. There they are—every scrap of them, I do believe. Though, if it’s any satisfaction to you, I’ve only glanced at about a dozen lines that he forced me to read. Don’t blush, you foolish child! They were rather prettily expressed. But be less lavish of your pearls for the future.”

It was good of Marion, that, in the midst of her expansive joy and gratitude, she could be checked by one misgiving.

“Flora, dearest, are you sure that you are safe, yourself? Can you tell me, that these miserable letters have not cost you too dear? I should never forgive myself, if

you have got involved in trying to help me."

Lady Dorrillon kissed the fair penitent's forehead with more warmth than she was wont to display.

"You're a kind little creature," she said. "It is not every one that looks back for their friends, when they have just got clear of the wood. No: you may burn those letters as soon as you choose. They have cost nothing that need weigh on your conscience or mine: nothing that even Sir Marmaduke would disapprove, if he knew all."

She only spoke simple truth there; fair words and manual salutations are the merest common-places in diplomacy like hers.

So Marion Charteris, after briefly verifying the tale of the packet, saw it melt away into feathery ashes; laughing merrily the while. But, before the small holocaust was consumed, she had registered a silent vow against similar indiscretion; which, to the best of the deponent's belief, has since been religiously kept. These things

being fulfilled, she left Lady Dorrillon to her repose, at the latter's especial request; and descended to minister to the entertaining of her other guests; carolling as she went, for very gladness of heart, as she had not done for many a day.

But Flora did not sleep, though for a long time she lay quite still, with eyelids fast closed; not unfrequently her lips moved; but they parted, once only, in an intelligible murmur—

“I am so glad he wanted money.”

After a while she seemed to grow restless; and, rising quickly, crossed the room towards a table, on which lay some jewel-caskets and a huge despatch-box. This last she opened, and took from a deep secret drawer a flat oval case of blue velvet. She held it in her hand for a minute or more, after returning to her sofa, as if half afraid to look on its contents. At last she touched the spring with a sort of petulance; as if angered at her own irresolution.

Within was a tinted photograph, evidently

taken from a half-length in oil. It was the likeness of a man still young, with features too massive and deeply cut for regular beauty ; under the heavy black moustache the lips looked braced and stern ; and the deep dark eyes seemed apter for command than pleading. Strength of passion and strength of will were written there, only too plainly. At the very first glance, you were aware that the original of that portrait must have been gifted with singular physical powers. The chest spread, broad and vast, under the steel of the cuirass (the dress was that of the Household Cavalry) ; and the muscles of the long sinewy hand, that rested on the sword-hilt, stood out under the gauntlet. After another steadfast look, you guessed that the man there represented might well have sinned and suffered above the measure of his fellows ; and that there must needs be a story attached to his name.

Truly, there *was* such a story ; and it has been told before—the story of Guy Livingstone.

That modest photograph had cost more than

many a gallery-treasure of European renown ; for it had been taken by stealth from a painting hanging in the hall of Kirton Manor ; and, when the old family-servant betrayed his trust, he could console himself with the reflection that a tithe of the bribe had led greater men astray.

On that face Flora Dorrillon gazed very long and earnestly. She gazed, till a change came over her own, such as no living creature had ever seen there. Her bright proud eyes grew soft and languid with unutterable passion ; the blood mantled hotly through her clear olive cheeks ; from her lips broke low thrilling murmurs of endearment, whilst they lavished on the senseless image caresses, that, not a few, in the flesh, would have risked their souls to win.

Folly ? Of course it was the very climax of folly ; scarcely worthy of a sentimental school-girl. But, I suppose, the cunningest of sorceresses have their weak point. In many circling years, there is one hour fatal to their spells ; if an assailant have the wit and courage to profit

thereby. Then the baffled witch can but make her moan—

Alas ! That any man should dare,  
To climb up the yellow stair '  
Of Rapunzel's golden hair.

Furthermore, my critical or cynical friend, I would have you, in the midst of your derision, remember, that there is reciprocity in most earthly things. I wonder how often you and I have, unwittingly, furnished food for merriment to the Dorrillon and her peers ? Is there not an ancient French proverb, which, being translated, saith—'He laughs well, who laughs last' ?

The paroxysm—no gentler word would aptly describe it—lasted not long ; but, when it passed away, Flora seemed thoroughly exhausted. She thrust the miniature-case under a pile of sofa-cushions ; and laid her head down wearily, there. In ten minutes, she was dozing quietly ; but, perchance, not dreamlessly. For ever and anon, the pomegranate lips would part in a faint languid smile, just revealing the pearl-rows within ;

as if sleep were making large amends for the troubles of the last half-hour.

When Lady Dorrillon woke, she was completely herself again; and was in brilliant spirits during all the remainder of the evening. Flemyng was almost beside himself with pride, as he gazed on her radiant beauty, and listened to her sparkling sallies.

There is so little to be recorded to that unlucky Vincent's credit, that it is only fair to mention, that he in no-wise attempted to abuse his advantages; and bore himself towards Flora with commendable discretion—not to say reserve. He did not affect to engross her attention; neither did he haunt her immediate neighbourhood too assiduously. Nevertheless, those two found several opportunities of converse, more or less confidential; and Flemyng was furnished with his credentials for Lady Dorrillon's lawyer: his further instructions were to be communicated to him in writing.

He conducted himself, too, in the smoking-room with a good deal of tact and judgment; not

affecting to make light of his losses; but speaking of their immediate liquidation in such a matter-of-course way, that even Hardress felt comfortably reassured, and half repented him of his suspicions. But nothing would induce Flemyng to tempt Fortune further: indeed the others did not press him. Everyone seemed content to let things rest as they were.

On the following day, Vincent started for town; having Bertie Grenvil for a travelling companion. The former kept up his spirits surprisingly well, for a man going up to meet a heavy settlement. But this was not so wonderful, after all.

When the first impulse, causing him to reject Flora's proffered aid, had passed off, he came over to her side of the question with remarkable facility; and was quite reconciled to the position by this time. Indeed he felt a certain pleasure, in being helped over such a formidable stile, by that delicate hand.

Flemyng's adieus at Charteris Royal were gone through with sufficient cordiality on

all sides. Marion went so far as to express vague hopes, of seeing him there again ere long. But Castlemaine had estimated the gallant's chances of return aright. When Vincent drove through the lodge-archway that morning, the couchant dragons, crowning the ponderous iron gate, grinned down on him—for the very last time.

## CHAPTER V.

### BOOT AND SADDLE.

So, winter softened into spring, and spring ripened to summer, bringing no incident worth recording; unless it be the removal of the Princess' Own from Torrcaster, to far less seductive quarters in the centre of the manufacturing districts. The War Office, as is well-known, is sometimes almost feminine in its caprices; regarding the Roster as a pleasant military fiction, or a subject for grim practical jokes. In the present instance, the route came down without the slightest previous notice; taking every one concerned by surprise, and causing the rupture of all manner of engagements. There might have been heard, I fear, that morning in Torrcaster barracks, a vast amount of 'indifferent'

language, whereof the mess-room was guilty of its full share.

The Colonel—as a rule, somewhat over-free of speech—was strangely silent, now. But, as he sate in the orderly-room, more than one man noticed his face—how set and black it was; save when gleams of fierce impatience flashed across it. The instant he was free, he ordered his horse, and rode swiftly away; never drawing bridle till he reached the lodge-gate of Blanche Ellerslie's modest demesne.

Two or three men were working at the parterres, dotting the wide expanse of smooth-shaven lawn, in the centre of which the quaint picturesque old house was set. To one of these the Colonel flung the rein of his steaming hack: bidding the man "walk the animal about till he was cool. It was not worth while putting him in the stable."

The next minute, with a heart fluttering like a girl's, Vane stood on the threshold of the sunny southern boudoir; where Blanche nestled among her flowers—more fresh and tempting than the

rarest of her own Provence roses. She evinced a proper amount of regret and surprise, on hearing the news ; was profuse in petulant invective against the tyrannous War Office—scrupling not, indeed, to speak evil of the highest dignitaries—and lavished pity on the unlucky exiles to the Cimmerian country. But this did not seem to satisfy her visitor at all.

“I’ve got something else to tell you this morning—Blanche,” he said. “Mayn’t I call you Blanche—just for this once?”

Yes, he might call her so, if it pleased him : farewells have great privileges. Besides, Mrs. Ellerslie was always ‘Blanche’ to her friends. And they had been very good friends—had they not?—though not very old ones. But what could he possibly have to say to her of such importance? He was not to keep her in suspense : she never could bear it.

Truly, the fair impatient was not long left in doubt as to Vereker’s meaning. Before they were three minutes older, he had asked her, if she liked him enough to be his wife.

To say that the lady was not intensely gratified, would be untrue. It was a triumph worth recording even in *her* diary. Colonel Vane was a brilliant *parti* in every worldly point of view: he was still in the early prime of manhood; well-born—brave, to a fault—very handsome too after a truculent fashion,—and, doubtless, he loved her with all his soul and strength. But then—he was notoriously violent and arbitrary of temper: it was not likely that he would connive at, or even patiently endure, the innocent diversions so dear to Blanche's coquettish little heart: moreover she had her own ideas—not in accordance with the received theory—as to the post-nuptial reformation of 'rakes.' She had enough, now, and to spare for all her wants, and a delicious sense of freedom to boot. On the whole, she thought she would 'leave well alone.'

Vereker read her hesitation aright: he saw that the scale was turning against him; and grew terribly earnest in his pleading.

What was it that she doubted about? Only let her speak: there was no possible fancy of

hers that he would not meet half-way. Of course, he didn't expect her to go knocking about with the regiment. His papers should go in directly : he had been sick of the Service, this year past. If she didn't like his home, when she saw it, she should live wherever she pleased ; and have her own friends always round her. If he had been too hasty, he would even wait awhile for her answer. Let her say anything in all the world but—'No.'

She was more moved than she cared to betray ; yet—having once come to a resolution—she wavered not a whit.

"I must say it"—she answered, softly and sadly. "For your sake, not less than my own. I'm not worthy of half that you offer ; for I'm foolish and giddy, and wickedly capricious—don't interrupt me : I know myself better than you can do. But, if I were a hundred times better we should never be happy together : I am certain of it. I am so sorry for this : but it serves me right, for being so thoughtless. I fancied you were only amusing yourself, when—Well : never mind.

I should be sorrier still, if we did not part friends. Surely we may do that—still ? ”

She held out her hand, in the pretty winning way, that few men, or women, were able to withstand ; but Vane did not seem to notice it.

“ Why can’t you speak truth ”—he growled—  
“ and say, who it is that you like better ? ”

The dark savage look in his eyes sent a thrill of vague terror through Blanche’s steady nerves. But she looked him fairly in the face, without flinching.

“ There is none such, on my honour ”—she said.

Even in our conventional generation, there is wild work at times, when the passions of men—pagans in all save the name—break loose. Harm might have come to some one—though none, of course, to herself—if Blanche had not spoken simple truth that day ; and if Vereker Vane had not believed her.

But he could not choose, but trust her—thus far.

“ Then there is no hope for me : none whatever ? ”

He rose, as he spoke.

“No hope—from me—” she answered. “But the world is very wide, and it has many distractions for such as know how to seek them, as well as you do. You will soon forget all this folly. But *don't* forget, that I thanked you for offering—what I could not take; and that I shall always wish you well. Now—say good-by at once.

And she, too, rose, reaching forth her hand once again: once again the proffer was unnoticed, if not actually spurned. They would have made a curious picture as they stood there: the trim slight figure, and delicate demure features, of the dainty little fairy, contrasted so wonderfully with the proportions and lineaments of the stalwart soldier.

For several seconds Vereker's eyes were riveted on his companion's face, with the desperate hungry eagerness of those who look their very last. Before she had an idea of his intention, his strong arms were clasped round her waist, and he was straining her to his breast, with a rough energy that left her breathless long after he had set her down; raining down, the

while, fierce kisses on her cheeks and brow and hair. All was so suddenly and quickly done, that the lady had no time to remonstrate or upbraid; even if she could have found voice to express her surprise and anger. The daring ravisher quitted the room and the house, without uttering one word of apology or adieu: he was riding swiftly away under the flowering limes, before the pretty bird had half composed her ruffled plumes.

Mrs. Ellerslie's first glance, on recovering her scattered senses, was turned towards the French windows opening down to the lawn; and her first thought was—

“How very lucky that no one was working on that side of the house!”

When she was sure that no indiscreet eyes had witnessed her discomfiture, she felt greatly comforted, and much inclined to laugh aloud; for she could savour ridicule keenly, even at her own expense. But a certain hysterical swelling in her throat warned her to forbear. So she soliloquised mutely; somewhat in this strain.

“Did any one ever hear of such an infamous abuse of confidence? He was so nice, too, at first, with his humility and unlimited concessions. ‘Put not your trust in Prancers’—I’m sure one might say. Well: I needn’t pity him; that’s one comfort. If I did him any harm, we are more than even now. It only shows how right I was, in holding fast to my—No. Fancy living with such an incarnate tornado as that man! He’ll keep his own counsel—I feel sure of that: otherwise I think, I should try and poison him. If Laura Brancepeth were to get hold of this, I should never hear the last of it. Now I must go and repair damages. I suppose I shall have another farewell-visit to-day, from that handsome wicked Armytage boy. I can keep *him* in order at all events; especially after such a lesson. I wonder whether *he* will propose to me too? *Ce serait drôle tout de meme.*”

We need not assist at that second passage-of-arms, which was not marked by any violation of the laws of courtly tourney.

As Vereker Vane paced slowly in through the

barrack-gates, the troopers sitting outside the guard-room rose up to salute him. When he had passed, said one—more observant than his comrades—

“What’s up with the Colonel this morning, I wonder? He’s never been and got another crumpler? It ain’t jumping weather now. But he looks a sight worse, than he did that day when he was so near drowned.”

Truly, the Colonel *had* gotten a fall; and a heavy one to boot. But all outward signs thereof soon vanished. Men of his stamp don’t die of heart-aches; neither do they often fall sick of sorrow. His life is good enough for most insurance offices even now; and he may be backed to outlast most of his hard-living fellows; though he has forced the pace fearfully since he sold out. Only that hard battered look, which used occasionally to disfigure his handsome face, has settled down there now, for ever and aye.

One meets Vereker Vane incessantly—always in the best of bad company. You may see him leaning over a certain low sweeping phaeton,

when Pelagia halts her steppers at the head of the Ladies' Mile, to give our wives and sisters a lesson in dress, if not in manners—lounging in the back-ground of the stage-box, in the front of which sits Anonyma, like a robber-queen of old, all-a-blaze with ill-gotten jewels—gazing down from the corner windows of the Café Anglais, on the turbulent lamp-lit Boulevard, with Emeraude's glittering green eyes, or Coralie's ruddy tresses, close to his shoulder. (His *petit nom* out there is 'Bruno:' he is so apt to growl and bite on slight provocation.) Since his small idol of fair white marble was shattered, the images before whom he casts down a careless irreverent worship, have all been of plaster, or sham Parian at the best. In plain words—from the hour that Blanche Ellerslie said him Nay, Vereker Vane has never wooed a woman, whose love was not to be had for the asking, or to be bought with gold.

Some who chance to be acquainted with this episode, are apt to impute most of the *Sabreur's* after misdemeanors to the dangerous widow.

So think not I. I believe there was a dash of the Bohemian in his blood, that was sure to assert itself sooner or later, though perchance not with such open audacity. I believe that if Blanche had said Yes instead of No, the marriage would have been an unhappy one ; and that the result—so far as Vereker was concerned—would have been nearly the same, only longer deferred.

But this opinion is strictly in confidence between us, reader of mine. Whenever the subject is mooted, and those two names are mentioned together, I shake my head as significantly as any other commiserant. I know my duty as a son of Adam better, than to lose an opportunity of shifting blame or responsibility on to the ivory shoulders of an absent Eve. Indeed, in this case, it would hardly be worth while to argue the question. The balance-sheet of that reckless little trader in hearts is so hopelessly heavy already, that it can matter nothing, if another creditor's be unrighteously added thereto.

## CHAPTER VI.

### ERUPIT.

WE take up the main thread of our story again, at Mote.

Within the last few months things were altered there, decidedly for the worse. Mrs. Maskelyne's temper had waxed more capricious and ungovernable—her husband's less even and enduring. Perhaps Brian was less disposed to be patient from the fact, that these sullen or angry fits were invariably more frequent and bitter after one of Daventry's visits: the latter came and went pretty much as he liked now—always on the same pretext, of Mr. Standen's business.

Certain households go on from year's end to year's end, very respectably if not smoothly, in spite of ceaseless jangles and jars: indeed, these

appear sometimes only to keep up such a wholesome irritation, as shall prevent the connubial blood from stagnating. But the heads of such families as these are not cast in Brian Maskeyne's mould.

His nervous horror of anything like a quarrel, had caused him for awhile to be weakly indulgent, rather than irritate his wife's uncertain temper ; for which he was then prone to find all imaginable excuses. Even now, when he was growing each day more heartsick and weary of it all, he still forbore to answer her according to her folly ; and invariably controlled himself in her presence ; though he had to wrestle with his rising passion, as with a spasm of physical pain.

Bessie knew this ; and would own it, sometimes, with a sort of tempestuous remorse, and vague self-accusation. But the knowledge did not make her a whit more considerate, nor permanently soften her. Brian loved his wife so dearly still, that common kindness on her part—to say nothing of demonstrative affection—would have won him back again in a week. But of

this Bessie Maskelyne seemed incapable: all her pretty petulance had vanished; in its place was a sullen listlessness, varied, on the faintest provocation by violent outbreaks: to use the servile vernacular—‘there was no pleasing her, any way.’

It was not in human nature—much less in a nature wayward and wilful as Brian’s—to endure all this tamely. His absence from home began to be more and more frequent: he affected a keen interest in all county affairs, which he had hitherto utterly neglected; and greatly relaxed his rule of going nowhere unless Bessie’s name was included in the invitation; it came to be understood that Maskelyne was not averse to sleeping where he dined; and he would sometimes stay over the following day, if an agricultural meeting, or the like, was in prospect.

Oddly enough—though Brian cordially hated his wife’s cousin, and perhaps imputed to the latter’s evil influence much of the discomfort prevailing at Mote—he never dreamt of suspecting Daventry of any criminal design.

The fatal *ophthalmia maritalis* was upon him : the disease that, often, is to be cured only by surgery so terribly severe, that the patient is fain to cry out in his agony—

“Ah, friends ! why have ye healed me ?”

It is possible, surely, to give a certain Great Personage his due, without constituting oneself his Advocate. On this principle, I would take leave to suggest that Jem Standen’s daughter hardly had a fair chance, after all, considering how fearfully her antecedents were against her ; and how difficult it must have been to cast old entanglements adrift. If she had married a man endowed with a will stronger than her own, and with cool judgment to boot, he might have overawed her violent temper till he brought it into wifely subjection : such an one she might have feared at first, possibly have loved in after-days ; and, with such a guide, she might have struggled through the mire and brambles that needs must have beset her path through the strange country, till she reached the open ground beyond. Then, it might have fared with her—not worse than

with many ; the noon and evening of whose life have passed tranquilly enough, after a dark and stormy morning.

But she began by despising her lover as a brain-sick boy ; and 'honour' her husband she never did, from the moment that she uttered a lie at the altar, even to the black and shameful end.

You may easily guess that, amongst the houses chiefly frequented by Maskelyne in his roaming fit, Warleigh stood first and foremost. It was not the best place for him, in some respects.

To begin with, he was made almost *too* welcome there ; it was somewhat too palpable that both his host and hostess considered their guest might have excellent reasons for preferring another fire-side to his own. Moreover, when he hinted at domestic troubles, and growing causes for discontent, if he was not actually encouraged to unbosom himself, he assuredly was not checked. Once, when Brian had been unusually explicit on this point, Mrs. Seyton did feel certain conscientious scruples, and confided

the same to her lord. But Tom utterly declined to view the matter in this light.

“What does it matter?” he grumbled. “He’s sure to find her out sooner or later.”

In this unrepentant frame of mind Kate was fain to leave him; neither did she care to broach the subject again. With this foolish pair, feeling was ever apt to carry the day against rigid principle. Indeed, they were too staunch in friendship not to be somewhat un-Christian in their antipathies.

It was a dull sultry evening in June—not a breath of air stirring—with threatening of storm; though, as yet, only summer lightning gleamed against the dark bank of cloud, from behind which came, ever and anon, faint murmurs of distant thunder. Seyton and Maskelyne were sitting alone over their claret: the latter had come over early on the previous afternoon, to dine and sleep: both, that day, had attended the meeting of an agricultural society close by; and Brian was not to return home till the morrow. They were on the point of rising to take their

coffee, under Kate's auspices, when a servant came to say that the head-keeper from Mote wished to see his master immediately.

"Send him in here," Brian said carelessly: "that is—if you don't mind, Tom. They've been meddling with the tame pheasants, I suppose. But why on earth should Farnell come bothering over here about it? He knows what to do better than I can tell him; and he has plenty of help at hand."

The instant the keeper entered, Seyton, at least, saw that there was no question of fur or feather here. He was a fine sturdy specimen of his class. His bluff face, florid by nature, had been weather-tanned to a deep copper-red; but its colour now was as of one lately risen from rose sickness, and the sweat stood in big drops on his forehead: as he stood there, kneading his cap nervously in his brawny hands, he looked strangely unlike the man whose name was a bugbear to every poacher, and poacher's child, within leagues of Mote.

"Take a glass of wine, Farnell," Seyton said.

"What the deuce has brought you over in such a hurry? You must have run every yard of the way."

"I driv over"—the other answered shortly. "And I'd rather not drink, sir; thanking you all the same. But I'd like to say a word or two to master—alone, if I might make so bold."

"What utter nonsense—" Brian was beginning. But Seyton stopped him at once.

"Didn't you say, a minute ago, that Farnell knew what to do as well as you could teach him? That's just what *I* think now. I'll leave you together. If I'm wanted, I'm always within hail."

Some apprehension that he could not define caused Tom to go no further away than the hall without. He heard the keeper's gruff voice murmuring monotonously: then a quick startled exclamation in Brian's tones; and Farnell's brief reply. Then the door was thrown violently open, and Maskelyne stood on the threshold, beckoning to him.

There was on his face nearly the same expres-

sion that it wore on the night of his mother's death, when he reeled under the sudden blow ; only, now it was marked by a ghastlier horror. His fingers closed round Seyton's wrist convulsively, as he drew him within the doorway ; and his voice sounded hard and grating, like the voice of one whose throat is parched with fever.

"Do you remember my asking you, long ago, if you knew anything about my—my wife ? May God in heaven forgive you, if you guessed half of—what I know now !"

He dropped the other's arm, as if he cared not to wait for a reply ; and sate down on the nearest chair, burying his face in his clasped hands, resting on the table.

Instantly it flashed across Seyton's memory how Emily Maskelyne had once addressed him in nearly the same words. In both matters he was surely guiltless, and could scarcely have acted otherwise than he did ; nevertheless, his conscience smote him again sharply. It was perhaps impatience of this self-reproach that caused him to accost Farnell somewhat angrily.

“What has happened over there? In the devil’s name, man—out with it at once. It only makes things worse, to falter over them.”

The keeper was in no-wise hurt or disconcerted by the manner of Seyton’s address; indeed, to use his own expression, “it did him good to be roughed a bit, just then.” Without more ado he told his tale: it was terribly simple and convincing.

Late on the previous evening Daventry had arrived at Mote. On that same afternoon, Farnell, going his rounds, had met the cousins walking through the park-woods. ‘Met,’ is hardly the right word; for they were talking so earnestly, that they passed within thirty yards of the keeper, as he came up a cross-ride, without knowing it. Their manner and bearing towards each other were so strangely confidential and familiar, that even Farnell’s rude instinct told him something was wrong. So he followed and watched, as his knowledge of the ground enabled him easily to do, till he had seen and heard enough (they chanced to halt for awhile close to where

he lay couched in the fern), to establish strong circumstantial proof of Mrs. Maskelyne's guilt.

It was some time before the sturdy keeper could collect his scattered wits, enough to act up to his simple ideas of duty.

"I were fairly dazed," he said afterwards. "If it had been anything in *my* line, I'd ha' known what to do. But sich goin's on as these is contrary to everythink."

Eventually it occurred to him to find Brian Maskelyne with the briefest possible delay; he chanced to have heard that the latter had gone over to Warleigh; so thither Farnell betook himself as fast as his stout old pony could draw him.

Seyton listened, without speaking a syllable; only grinding his teeth now and then. Before the tale was quite told, he had rung a bell sharply.

"Let Mr. Maskelyne's phaeton come round at once," he said to the servant. "Don't stand staring there" (for the man could not dissemble his amazement); "but tell them to be quick about it."

Then he turned and laid his hand on Brian's shoulder, who had not stirred since he sate down.

"I go with you to Mote, of course. I'll say three words to Kate before we start. I myself can't be sorrier than she will be. Go downstairs, Farnell; and get a draught of something, if you can't eat. I don't wonder all this has sickened you. I needn't tell you to keep a close tongue in your head. So far, you have done right well and wisely."

So Seyton went to seek his wife at once. You may guess at Kate's grief when she heard the shameful news; but she, too, was more shocked than surprised.

"I'm so glad that you can go with him, Tom," she said.

"I couldn't do otherwise," her husband answered. "If Brian went back alone, there might be black work done before morning; and blood won't wash out such a scandal as this: more's the pity, I'm half inclined to say. There's one miserable comfort: the disgrace must have come sooner or later; and the thieves' brood will be

cleared out of Mote to-night, for good and all. Kiss me once, my Kate, before I go. When I hear these things, I feel as if I never thanked Providence half enough for giving me—you."

When Seyton returned to the dining-room he found Maskelyne sitting in the same posture: he did not lift his head till his carriage was announced: then he rose, and followed his friend out, silently. His face could scarcely be paler than its wont; but there was an unnatural whiteness about the lips; and in his great black eyes there gleamed an evil light. Tom was thoroughly right: Brian was *not* fit to be trusted that night alone. Few words were spoken, and those of no special import, from the moment that Seyton, at a sign from the other, took the reins, till they reached the side-entrance into the Mote demesne that lay nearest to Warleigh. It was locked; but the groom opened it with a master-key. Their road led, not up the main avenue but across an open part of the park whence a considerable part of the house was visible; indeed, it was necessary to coast round an angle of

the gardens before you branched off either to the front entrance or the stables in the rear.

Just before reaching this point, Seyton felt his arm grasped suddenly : and turning, as he drew rein, he saw that his companion was pointing towards three windows, nearly opposite to them now, brilliantly lighted, and apparently open ; though the distance was too great to make sure of this.

Seyton was as much at home at Mote as if he had been born therein ; and guessed Brian's meaning at once. Those windows belonged to a room called the Oak Parlour, which, for generations, had been the usual dining-room of the family, when they had no strangers to entertain. It was nearly a certainty that those whom they sought were there.

" Take the reins," Tom said to the groom who sat behind them ; " and mark what I tell you. Drive very slowly along the turf by the road-side—there's plenty of light for that—till you come closely up to the stable-archway : the asphalté will deaden the wheels there if you go in at a

foot's pace. Get some one to help you with your horses whom you can trust, not to make a noise. Neither of you are to leave the stables till you're sent for—mind that. And don't take the harness off. Your master does not wish it known in the house that he has returned. You understand, I can see: that's enough. Come along, Brian."

In another minute the two men had leapt the sunk-fence of the gardens, and were approaching the house; masking themselves where they could by clumps of shrubs and the like: ere long they found themselves close under the open windows of the Oak Parlour—so close that they could hear low voices and smothered laughter from within, though no words were distinguishable. There was a considerable downward slope from the front of the house to the rear; so that—entering *à plain-pied* from the north—you found yourself some twelve feet above the ground when you looked out southward, with a basement-story below you.

"There's sure to be a ladder near the tool-

house"—Brian said in a hoarse whisper ; speaking now for the first time.

Indeed, they found one without any difficulty, of a length convenient for their purpose, and laid it noiselessly against the ivy curtaining the walls, so that the topmost rung lay just below the window-sill.

As Maskelyne was about to mount, Seyton grasped his arm.

"You won't be rash?" he said in his ear. "For God's sake keep cool."

The other shook his head ; and, extricating himself impatiently, went up with swift cautious steps ; till he could discern plainly what was going on within, without much danger of giving immediate alarm.

Can you guess what Brian Maskelyne saw, when he came to the house of his fathers like a thief in the night ?

## CHAPTER VII.

### EVASIT.

IN the remotest corner of the room, buried in the depths of a luxurious arm-chair—his bloated limbs supported on another—Mr. Standen was sleeping heavily; his stertorous breathing stirred the cambric kerchief that veiled his face till it heaved again; it was evident that the roll of a drum would scarcely have wakened him. But Brian never glanced at this figure: two others, in the same room, engrossed all his interest. It was no wonder. Those other two made up a picture that *Le Mari Complaisant* himself would hardly have contemplated with calmness.

Daventry was lounging indolently on a low couch, drawn up to a round table laden with all manner of rare fruits and wines: his complexion

was not much altered, but there was a 'puffed look about his face, which, together with a certain glaziness of eye, betrayed that he had been drinking deep : neither was his carouse finished, it would seem, though he had begun to smoke ; for, each time that he took the cigar from his lips, he refreshed himself with a copious draught from a huge goblet at his elbow.

On some cushions strewn close by the couch's side, Mrs. Maskelyne half reclined ; so that her shining tresses almost brushed her cousin's shoulder : her dress—absurdly rich for such a family-party—seemed expressly fashioned to enhance her beauty : she had never looked more transcendently handsome.

Distraught as he was with anger and shame, her unhappy husband noted this : he noted something else too—something which added the last drop to the full cup of his dishonour. On Bessie's fair face there were no vulgar signs of excess ; nevertheless, it was too evident, that she had shared in the night's revelling more freely than beseems womanhood. A few cups more would

ripen the lovely Bacchanal into the reckless Mænad. As it was, her head might have formed a study for Ariadne at the bridal-feast, before Evian license had degenerated into orgie. Just at that moment she was humming below her breath a verse of one of Béranger's earlier *chansons*: a good knowledge of French was among Bessie's rare accomplishments.

"That sounds rather nice," Daventry said, lazily. "Sing it out loud."

"You wouldn't understand it," she retorted. "Besides, you must ask more prettily than that, before I exert myself to amuse you. You're not quite the Sultan yet, remember; or, at all events, you're not in your own harem."

"So, you want to be entreated," the other said; with his own devilish sneer. "You must do as you're bid, young lady. I wonder you haven't learnt that much by this time. You're spoilt by the company you've been keeping lately. One would think, you were playing the fool with that whey-faced husband of yours. I wonder how he'll like finding me here, when [he

comes back from Warleigh. Why don't he stop there altogether? Curse the whole lot of them!"

Mrs. Maskelyne held up her forefinger in imperious warning; it was a white and shapely finger enough, albeit not quite so taper as might have been desired.

"Now, Kit, you'd better drop that, at once. I won't hear the poor harmless boy abused behind his back; and you've less right to do it than any one living. You don't frighten me with your big words. If I sing, I'll sing to please myself, not you. And I'll have my wages beforehand; or something on account, at all events."

No need to ask what these wages were, as she held up her ripe lips poutingly. Before such a temptation even Galahad might have owned himself in sore strait.

The Lawyer laughed a coarse, careless laugh; he bent his head, nevertheless, to meet the caress half-way. At that instant a slight noise from the window behind them diverted the attention of both. After one glance over his shoulder,

Daventry sprang up with a startled oath, echoed by a shriek from Bessie. But, before he had fairly gained his feet, Brian Maskelyne's gripe was on his throat; and, amidst a crash of shivering glass, the two men rolled over on the floor—grappling.

All this while Seyton had stood stock-still, watching his friend's movements heedfully, and keeping himself ready for prompt action. As Maskelyne laid his hands on the window-sill to swing himself up, Tom's foot was set on the ladder, and he mounted at his best speed. But—quick and agile as he was—he came on the scene some seconds too late. Indeed, Brian had sprung, as it were, with a single bound from the ledge of the window to his enemy's throat.

When Seyton vaulted lightly in, Mr. Standen had just started from his chair, and was staring about him with wild, lack-lustre eyes, like some hideous old somnambulist. Bessie had thrown herself back against the mantel, her hands clasped tightly, her beautiful face convulsed with terror. Her firm nerves were for the moment utterly

unstrung; and her agonised entreaty was almost unintelligible.

“Part them—oh, for God’s sake, only part them!”

Seyton needed no bidding to do that. It was only by a desperate strain of his tough muscles—exerted, too, with very scant ceremony—that he succeeded in wrenching the two men asunder. It must be owned, that even in his rough handling, Tom evinced a certain respect of persons. He dragged Brian back and loose by main force; but, in so doing, he used the Lawyer’s prostrate carcase as a fulcrum for his own foot: it was many a day before those aching ribs forgot the merciless pressure.

Brian ceased to struggle directly he found himself fairly in Seyton’s grasp. A thin stream of blood was trickling from a small triangular cut just above his eye-brow; for, even in that brief confused grapple, the diamond on Daven-try’s left hand had found time to come home, missing, by about half-an-inch, the fatal temple-vein. The Lawyer was in yet worse case. He was

two stone heavier than Maskelyne, and infinitely his superior in strength and science; but all these advantages were neutralised by the murderous gripe on his throat; had there been none to part them, those slender hands would assuredly have done hangman's work. As it was, for several seconds after the struggle was over, Daventry lay choking and gurgling helplessly, before he managed to rise and stagger into the nearest chair.

Seyton was the first to speak, addressing himself to Brian.

"I'm utterly ashamed of you. Is this what you promised me? Do you think you can better things by meddling with a hound like yonder one? We'll have no more witnesses in, at all events."

He strode to the door, and locked it—just in time. For hurrying footsteps sounded in the corridor; and a tremulous voice asked, "what was the matter?"

"Go down stairs again," Tom said, quietly. "And don't come back till you're rung for:

you're not wanted here. You know me well enough to do as I bid you."

There was a whispered consultation; then some one said, in firmer tones :

"It is Mr. Seyton, sure enough. It's all right, if he's there"—and then the footsteps went away.

All this while, Maskelyne leant against the opposite angle of the mantel from that where his wife was standing; he still drew his breath hard and pantingly; and from time to time staunched the blood that had not ceased to flow from his forehead, with a kind of mechanical carelessness. Bessie had quite recovered her self-possession. She was one of those obstinately dauntless persons who never will throw up any game whilst a single card remains to be played; so now, she would make a last effort: perhaps, to do her justice, for the sake of others, rather than for her own. She crossed over to where her husband stood, and laid her hand on his arm, with a brave attempt at her old imperious gaiety.

"Why, Brian, are you utterly mad? What

penance do you mean to pay for frightening me out of my wits, and nearly killing my cousin, when we were neither of us dreaming of harm? Somebody must have been poisoning your mind against me. I think I can guess who. But it isn't like you, to condemn people unheard; especially your poor wife, who has every one but you against her. Kit, why do you sit so helplessly there? Surely you might take my part, if not your own."

Thus adjured, the Lawyer did speak, but it was hoarsely, and with difficulty; and he kept constantly clutching his throat, as if he were choking still.

"I can't, for the life of me, understand what it's all about. The world has come to a pretty pass, if a man can't dine with his own cousin, in her own house, in her own father's presence, without being throttled unawares. I'm not likely to trouble Mote with my presence again; but I'd like to set things straight before I go. Mr. Maskelyne, on my honour, there's nothing——"

He came to an abrupt stop here, fairly disconcerted by the other's glance: even his case-hardened hide was not proof against its cold, cutting scorn. To neither his wife nor her kinsman did Brian answer one word. But he shook off Bessie's hand, as if the taint of leprosy was in her fresh beauty; and turned to Seyton.

"They talk of punishment on this side of the grave. Mine ought to count for something. That I should have let my mother die, rather than break faith with *her*; and, before I had put off my mourning—to hear what I've heard, and see what I've seen to-night. A pretty picture it was! By G—d, there's not a better one in all the 'Harlot's Progress.'"

If it was not fear, it was some feeling nearly akin thereto, that caused the guilty wife to shrink back before the hate and loathing of those fierce black eyes. But Seyton came forward, and grasped Brian's arm; speaking coldly and gravely.

"You're not fit to talk just now: your head is

turned with all this. I'm sure I don't wonder at it. Will you let me speak for you, as I spoke for your mother, long ago ? ”

The other nodded assent, as he cast himself down on a couch ; a physical reaction was coming over him, and he felt strangely faint and weary.

“ Mrs. Maskelyne ”—Seyton went on—“ I can give you no other title whilst you are under this roof—when I say, that your husband knows *all*, I have said nearly enough for all present purposes. There is evidence, enough, and to spare, against you, should such be needed; but, I fancy, your side will hardly care to push ours to proof. As to what future steps Brian may think it right to take, I can say absolutely nothing. You must see the expediency of leaving Mote with as little delay as possible ; your father is ready to escort you. If you wish to communicate hereafter with your—with Brian, you know his lawyer's address perfectly well.”

Whilst Seyton thus delivered himself, a marked change had come over Bessie's bearing and

demeanour. As she drew her superb figure up to its full height, no injured patrician dame could have looked more royally defiant.

“Have it your own way,” she said, “and tell your own tale. I shan’t take the trouble to contradict you, now or ever. So I am really to turn my back, to-night, on Mote, for good and all? Well—as the woman says in the play—‘I will go to mine own people.’ The change won’t break my heart, I can tell you. I’m nearly tired of playing the great lady—getting small thanks and less credit for it. I’ll try the old roving random life again : it suits me best, after all. Papa—why do you go on whimpering in that absurd way? Of course, you’ll be taken care of, somehow. And Kit—don’t look so downcast : it’s no more your fault than mine, that our genteel comedy could not be played out. Hanging our heads and moping over it, won’t mend matters, at all events. Whenever you go, and wherever you go, I go too : that is—if you care for my company.”

Even while she was speaking she had passed over to where Daventry sate, and laid her hand

on his shoulder. The Lawyer twisted himself away uneasily ; muttering something about “ infernal folly,” and “ rashness ” ; and never lifting his dark spiteful glances from the ground. But Bessie did not seem to heed her cousin’s ungracious manner ; she kept her place resolutely at his side, as if conscious that *there* henceforward—come what might—she was destined to abide.

She could spare no repentant word—no pleading or pitiful look—for the beguiled husband, who had laid all that man holds dearest at her feet ; never grudging the sacrifice so long as he believed her true ; who would have drained his heart’s blood, drop by drop, to save her from injury and insult. All her care and tenderness were kept for the sullen craven who had tyrannised over her from childhood ; and now—in the midst of the ruin he had caused—was brooding only over the partial discomfiture of his own sordid ends. Daventry liked his cousin well, in his brutal, sensual way : but had the scene been shifted to the shore of the Bosphorus ; and she had stolen forth, at the peril of her life, to join

him, Kit would have betrayed her retreat for a sufficient 'consideration': aye—though he had guessed that her portion, the same night, would be sack or bowstring.

All this Bessie knew, whilst she kept her place unflinchingly at his side. Despite the woman's cynicism and ingratitude, few men would have been free from a shameful fascination—gazing on her grand defiant beauty. Throughout all ages, Crime—fair-faced and audacious—has never lacked admirers. Unless old tales lie, the hearts of some of our ancestresses fluttered with more than pity as they watched Claude Duval—all lace and lawn and scarlet—passing airily to his doom on the Tyburn Tree.

But Tom Seyton, being a very practical matter-of-fact person, was not apt to be impressed by stage-effects, however striking; and was singularly indifferent to the romance of sin.

He answered Bessie's last words with provoking coolness.

"You are under a great mistake, when you talk in that strain. After you have once gone

forth from Mote, you can drag Brian's name through the mire, at your pleasure, as long as he chooses to let you wear it. But while you are under this roof, you are under his authority; and you must leave it according to his fancy—not your own. It is best to avoid unnecessary scandal. So it will be best that you should go away quietly, with all your belongings; under your father's escort, as I said before. As for your cousin—there's no need to stand on ceremony with *him*; nor is there any need that he should cumber the air here, three minutes longer."

Daventry rose up on his feet with a miserable attempt at bravado.

"You're giving yourself a deal of trouble about nothing," he said. "I'm just as keen to be out of this, as you can be to get rid of me. I wish I'd never seen the inside of these doors. If you'll unlock that one, I'll go to my room, and start as soon as I've got my traps together. The devil thank you for your hospitality! Now—do you mean to let me pass?"

Seyton turned away from the speaker towards

Maskelyne ; who sate with his head bowed on his breast, apparently scarcely heeding or hearing what passed around him.

“Brian, I’ve a fancy about this. You don’t mind my indulging in it ?”

Tom had to take silence for consent ; but he went on, without a pause—addressing himself to Daventry, now.

“I shall not unlock the door ; not let you pass—simply, because your way out lies *there*.” He pointed to the open window. “The road that was good enough for honest men, is too good for a cur like yourself. Take it—do you hear me ?—and without parleying, if you’re wise.”

Even Daventry’s base blood, torpid under any ordinary insult, surged up furiously in revolt ; besides, the purely animal instinct, that sometimes causes the most cowardly of brutes to show fight, caused him to remember that a woman stood by, who had dared and lost all for him. He set his feet firmly ; and his savage eyes glanced round, seeking a weapon, as he said, through his clenched teeth—

“You may do your worst and be d—d to you. I’ll go my own way, or ——”

The tardy defiance was never finished. Before it was half uttered, Seyton had begun to draw nearer and nearer to the speaker, with a measured determination, more ominous than haste; his face settling fast into the dark fell menace that possessed it on the night when he sought and found Brian Maskelyne.

You may, perchance, remember that our prudent Tom’s grand theories concerning long-suffering and the like, were absurdly apt to break down in time of trial; as is the case with more eminent sages, his precepts were infinitely better than his practice.

Daventry had seen those features thus transfigured once before: but the sight was utterly new to Bessie Maskelyne—so new and strange, that she was fairly startled out of her audacity and self-possession. Her only anxiety now was to get her cousin out of harm’s way.

“Go Kit. For God’s sake, go—this moment——” she managed to shriek out.

And, clutching his arm, strove to drag him towards the window with all her strength—a strength passing that of ordinary womanhood.

The Lawyer did not need much coaxing or compulsion: with every step that Seyton advanced, he himself receded two, till his back touched the window-sill. There he shook off Bessie's grasp roughly; and, muttering something about "two to one being no fair-play," swung himself up and outwards: he groped about cautiously with his feet till he felt the uppermost rounds of the ladder; but directly he did so, he began to descend in such haste, that he stumbled midway, and fell heavily on the turf beneath.

He came to no hurt, however, for Bessie, leaning anxiously from the window, saw him rise at once, and disappear into the darkness—first growling out a curse on the house and all it held, that made even her blood curdle; though she was as 'steady' under ordinary foul language as an adjutant's charger under fire.

Then a great revulsion of feeling came over the guilty wife. Utterly reckless of her own dis-

honour, she sickened at her paramour's shame. Now that he was safe, she felt as though she had rather he had died where he stood, than have escaped—*thus*.

How many are there in this world, I wonder, who, bewailing their past weakness—aye, with tears of blood—have cried aloud that, were the choice given them again, they would take the scathe rather than the scorn?

The effect of this scene on Bessie Maskelyne was very remarkable. When she turned inwards from the window, her spirit was thoroughly quelled: she had neither heart nor courage now to fight out the losing battle; and she addressed Seyton with a submissive humility piteously significant, considering the nature of the woman.

“As Brian won't speak to me—I can't blame him—will you tell me what I am to do? I don't wonder that you are anxious to get rid of us. We won't trouble you a minute longer than we can help; and we won't rob you, either. I'll only take what is really necessary for travelling; so we

shall very soon be ready. When do you wish us to go ? ”

Before Seyton could reply, Maskelyne lifted his head ; and spoke in a dull, heavy voice, like one newly roused from narcotic sleep.

“ Make her understand—I can’t—that I wish her to take everything she has ever called her own, except my mother’s jewels. It will be a kindness : the very last she can ever do me.”

“ You hear what Brian says ? ” Seyton resumed, in a somewhat gentler tone. “ I am sure you will not argue this point ; but do just as he wishes. As for the time of your departure, you will fix that yourself. The carriages to take you into Torrcaster will be ready whenever you choose to order them. As long as you are under this roof, you are still mistress of all. I don’t want to be officious or dictatorial ; but I am forced to speak for Brian, as you see. I confess I think it would be far best that you should part here—at once, and not meet again.”

Bessie bowed her head—always with that same strange humility—murmuring—

“Yes : it will be far best so.”

Then she moved towards the door which Seyton had unlocked and held open, taking her father's arm as she passed him : the miserable old man needed both guidance and support. But she turned on the threshold, as if checked by some sudden impulse ; and walked back with the quick firm step, you might have noted on that evening when you first saw her under twilight. Maskelyne did not seem to heed her approach ; and, for some seconds, Bessie stood behind his shoulder, gazing down on her husband's motionless figure, rather wistfully. Then she said—

“Brian : I don't deserve to be listened to. But, if you shut your ears to the very last words that I shall ever trouble you with, perhaps you'd be sorry some day. I'm not going to sham penitence : I dare say, if it were all to do over again, I shouldn't come much better out of it. I'm not going to excuse myself, either. But if you knew all, you would set something down to the school I was trained in : girls who see and hear what I did before I was sixteen, don't often make good

wives to honest men. They took care to clip my wings early: long before you saw me, I had less free-will left than most decoy-ducks. I have had a hard life of it, sometimes; and I shall have a harder yet in time to come. 'It will serve me right'—everyone will say. So say I; but I wouldn't change it, even if I could. But I *am* sorry that we ever met—so sorry, that I wish one of us had died first. Remember: I have never asked you to forgive. But if I ever say a prayer again, I will pray that you may one day forget that you ever knew me, or mine. Farewell."

She spoke in a low, steady voice; pausing a little between each curt sentence. With the last word, she stooped and just brushed Brian's hair with her lips. Then she passed swiftly out into the corridor, where her father stood, muttering and moaning.

I have not alluded to Mr. Standen throughout; simply because no one present had taken the slightest heed of him. But, in truth, he supplied the horribly grotesque contrast which often seems

to bring out in blacker relief the other features of any picture of human sorrow or pain. While he went maundering on—first entreating to be informed “what it was all about;” then whimpering out cautions to every one, “to keep their tempers, and talk it over quietly;” finally subsiding into querulous curses, levelled chiefly at the culprits who “had turned him adrift again in his old age”—he might have suggested to Doré a fresh illustration for the *Inferno*.

Brian never stirred or lifted his head, whilst his wife was speaking: only he shivered slightly, when he felt her warm breath on his neck. But, as the last rustle of Bessie’s dress died away in the corridor, he rose and came hurriedly towards Seyton.

“Let us go back to Warleigh at once,” he said. “We have no more to do here. I think I should go mad, if I stayed in this house an hour longer.”

And, indeed, the pupils of his eyes were fixed in the unnatural dilatation which betokens pressure on the brain.

"Don't excite yourself," Tom answered, soothingly. "We'll start as soon as I've seen Dunlop, and when you've had your head looked to. That's a nasty cut: does it pain you much?"

Maskelyne looked at the speaker in a vacant, puzzled way; putting his hand to his brow, on which the blood had now congealed.

"The cut? I'd forgotten all about it. It's not worth thinking of. No: my head don't pain me much. Only it feels like a lump of hot lead. This room is horribly close; and the air outside is little better."

Nevertheless he went straight to the window, and leant out into the murky night; as if the dark blank void could bring him rest.

In a couple of minutes, Tom had so far set things to rights that there were few traces left of the recent struggle, beyond a small heap of shivered glass and china. Then he rang for the butler; and that dignitary soon appeared, wearing his imperturbable company-face.

"Look here, Dunlop," Seyton said. "I've always considered you both prudent and trust-

worthy. We shall soon see if I'm right or wrong. There has been sad work here, to-night, as you may guess : there's no need to make things worse by prying or babbling. You'll know all about it, some day. All that I can tell you now, is that Mrs. Maskelyne and her father leave Mote within a few hours, and that it is not likely they will return. You will see that everything is properly arranged for taking them into Torrcaster ; and—mark this—that lady is your mistress, so long as she is under this roof ; and you will have to answer for any disrespect or disobedience shown to her. I'm not afraid of you ; but I expect you to keep the other servants in order. Send round to the stables and tell them to put to : your master goes back with me to Warleigh. And bring something to bandage a cut ; a couple of cambric handkerchiefs will do. Do you fully understand me ? ”

Mr. Dunlop listened with deferential attention ; his staid, serene countenance betraying no shade of surprise. Long experience had taught him to ignore—at least outwardly—all the faults, failings,

and disasters of those whom he condescended to serve.

"I am grieved to hear this, sir," he replied, with a decorous sympathy. "But I understand you perfectly; and you may thoroughly trust me. I should be sorry to forfeit your good opinion."

So the butler departed; his grave brow slightly over-cast with care. Yet not more so than might have been expected, if he had been charged with some important domestic commission, not easy of execution, such as, for instance, the preparation of a state banquet at very short notice. Let it be recorded, that he carried out his order, faithfully, to the letter. Up to the moment when the train moved out of Torrcaster station, and the liveried footmen, left on the platform, saluted her retreating figure, Mrs. Maskelyne could not have complained of the faintest abatement in the observance due to the *châtelaine* of Mote.

One, out of all that great household, chose to follow Bessie's fortunes,—her French maid, Rosalie. That young person was singularly free from prejudices; and was by no means punctilious

as to the virtue of her mistresses; sagely reasoning, that liberality in morals generally entails liberality in perquisites; so that the social bankruptcy of a great dame ought to make her waiting-maid's fortune.

*"Le caractère de madame est un peu vif—"* Rosalie confessed to a friend and compatriot—  
*"et elle a la langue passablement déliée. Mais elle est bonne diablesse au fond. Et j'aime mieux les diableses que les bégueules. Va!"*

The threatenings of storm had all passed away; and it was a faultless morning, when Mrs. Maskelyne came down to the carriage that was to take her into Torrcaster.

She was pale, certainly: that might be accounted for by sleeplessness; for preparations for departure had occupied her throughout the night. But on her beautiful face there was never a sign of shame or sorrow: as she walked through the hall, for the last time, her foot faltered no more than when she crossed it first, as the mistress of Mote. And she seemed to have imparted somewhat of her own spirit to her unhappy father. If

Mr. Standen could not bear himself with dignity under his reverses, he could at least refrain from betraying unmanly weakness. Even his ludicrous attempt at bravado, as he followed his daughter out—whistling a low defiant tune, and returning the servants' salutes with a careless condescension—was better than the drivelling of some hours ago.

It was an open barouche that took those two to Torrcaster station. As it drove off Mrs. Maske-lyne rose up on her feet, and—resting her hand on the hood—looked back long and steadfastly. There is always a vague charm attaching to objects, seen surely for the very last time, even if we have not loved them well. Perhaps Bessie's unromantic nature was not altogether proof against this, just at that moment. Certain it is, that the grand old house, and the stately demesne around, had never seemed to her so fair, as they did on that especial morning. As she thought how all this had been won—and lost, she could not stifle a deep, regretful sigh. The next instant, she laughed out loud at her own weakness ;

and 'kissed her hand in a saucy adieu. As she sate down, she began to sing softly to herself the last lines of a ballad that was very famous once. She had a good clear untutored voice; and Byron's was about the only poetry that Bessie cared for :

With thee, my bark, I'll quickly fly,  
Across the ocean brine :  
Nor care what home thou bear'st me to,  
So not again to mine.

“ What on earth are you singing about ? ” Mr. Standen growled, savagely. “ Are you satisfied with the mischief you, and your —— cousin, have done between you ? I wish the devil had taken him, before he ever showed himself here ! ”

To which his daughter retorted that—“ singing was better than whining any day; that, if he wanted to curse Kit, he could wait and do it to the other's face; and that, if he couldn't talk without making himself disagreeable, he might as well hold his tongue.”

Which irreverent advice Mr. Standen thought it prudent to follow.

In this wise, the glossy bright-eyed kestrel, whom tiercels' training could not reclaim, shook off silver bells, and velvet hood, and broidered jesses; and fled away—to consort, henceforward for evermore, with gleds, and hawks, and such birds of prey as make their nests deep in Bohemian forests, or in the desolate places of the Wilderness that girdles the frontier of the reputable world.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

EARLY in the spring of that same year, Mrs. Flemyng went to visit some relations dwelling in the midland shires; and stayed a week in Town, on her way back to Warleigh, which was virtually her home.

On the very evening of her return, Kate was struck by a marked alteration in her mother's manner: at first she attributed this to the fatigue of the journey; but, when the morrow and the next day brought no change for the better, she grew seriously alarmed, and confessed it to Seyton. He too had not failed to remark that something was seriously amiss with Mrs. Flemyng. The plaintive air of mock-martyrdom had entirely vanished: in its stead there was a settled depression, painfully real. Mrs. Flemyng

was never garrulous; but she had become unnaturally silent of late; and would sit, by the hour together, gazing wistfully into the fire, or out of a window, with tears welling slowly up into her eyes.

In reply to Kate's anxious questions, she would only allow that 'she had not been feeling quite strong lately;' nevertheless she would not hear of calling in medical aid.

The Seytons were naturally in a great strait of perplexity. Twice or thrice in their mutual speculations there was mention of the prodigal son's name: but there appeared no valid reason for connecting him with Mrs. Flemyng's low spirits. He had taken chambers and an *atelier* in Town; and was supposed to be painting in a vague desultory sort of way. His name appeared tolerably often in the chronicle of banquets and balls; and they heard accidentally of his having become a member of a certain club, noted for high play; but no definite rumour to Vincent's disadvantage had penetrated to Warleigh.

In the face of all this, the Seytons could only

see their way clearly—thus far. It was evident that their Norway trip must be given up for this year. Kate would never have forgiven herself, if she had dreamt of leaving her mother in her present state. As Tom directed the letter, in which he resigned his rod, his remark to his wife was eminently philosophical.

“Never mind, pet, we shall deserve a double allowance of luck next season: I shouldn’t wonder if we landed the ‘king-fish.’ And we shall enjoy it all the more for missing one turn. Besides, we’ve had so much sport one way or another, that it’s about time we did some work: there’s no better work, that I know of, than seeing your friends through trouble. We’ll try and help the poor Madre through hers, whatever it may be.”

Yet, as the weather waxed warmer, Mrs. Flemyng’s mood seemed to brighten: to be cheerful was not in her nature; but her moral barometer rose steadily again towards the mild meek melancholy, which, in her, was synonymous with Set Fair.

Tom began to repent himself somewhat of his over-hasty self-denial (the vacant rod on that famous river had been snapped up the instant it was known to be free); but, before he had time to grumble, the catastrophe at Mote occurred. Thenceforward, he never regretted that he had stayed at home.

Three weeks or so might have passed since the events chronicled in the last chapter. Brian Maskelyne had departed for a long Continental tour, which was to begin in the Tyrol and end—he himself knew not where. The first uproar of the scandal, that had set all the Marlshire tattlers buzzing like bees round an overturned hive, had begun to die away in vague intermittent rumours. Seyton had begun to talk of taking Kate up to Town, for a fortnight, to help him to get rid of his Derby winnings, “in a fashionable manner;” (for, though Crusader only ran a good second, Tom had contrived to make nearly 200*l.* out of his ‘long shot’ by judicious hedging); and Mrs. Flemyng had half promised to accompany them; when,

suddenly, all plans were deranged at Warleigh.

On a certain morning, some farm-business had called Seyton early a-field; so Kate was breakfasting alone with her mother when the post came in. Before Mrs. Flemyng had read the first page of her first letter, she dropped it with a faint cry; and, covering her face in her handkerchief, fell to weeping convulsively.

Kate partly guessed at the truth as her eye lighted on a well-known handwriting; but she guessed not all, till she had taken up the letter, in obedience to a sign from Mrs. Flemyng. A very brief glance at its contents was enough to startle and shock her, scarcely less than her mother had been, though she did not give way so completely.

It was a petition, or rather a demand, from Vincent for the advance of several thousands, to pay off pressing play-debts; followed by dark and deadly hints as to the consequences of refusal. A cruel letter—had it been addressed to the sternest of paternal despots;

unutterably base—addressed to a weak doting woman.

Little by little, and word by word, broken by much stormy sobbing, the poor lady's confession was made. As she passed through Town, Vincent had induced her to sell out a large sum (though far less than his present demand) to assist him in clearing off *all* his liabilities, as he said; promising that this should be the very last tax on her generosity. She forced herself to believe him, at the time; but was haunted afterwards with divers sharp misgivings. Of late, on the principle of 'no news being good news,' she had become more tranquil and hopeful; so that the blow fell, now, almost unexpectedly.

Kate was equal to any ordinary emergency; but not to such an one as this. All sisterly love was swallowed up, for the moment, in hot honest indignation; yet she had sense enough to remember, that the expression of this would not lighten her mother's sorrows; so she fell back upon the last resource of the 'ministering angel'—sympathetic tears; and the two sat there,

making their moan helplessly together, till Seyton returned.

His presence restored something like order to the dejected family-council; and he was very soon in possession of all the circumstances.

As he read the first part of the letter, he frowned heavily; when he came to the last, his face settled into the same expression that it had worn, on that evening long ago, when Vincent Flemyng brought the tidings of his Oxford disaster; and Tom "couldn't see the pull of stage-tricks on society, especially when women's nerves are to be played upon."

"It's a bad, black case from end to end—" he said. "And *that's* about the worst bit in it:" (he struck the especial page sharply with his finger). "It would have been cowardly to hint at such things, even if Vincent had ever seriously meditated them; which I don't believe he ever did. I can't help your both thinking me hard and brutal. I don't believe that he has ever looked at suicide, more nearly than I have done myself. I give him credit for that much of common sense,

at all events. But it's no use abusing him; and it's cruel to do so to you, mamma. Have you made up your mind what to do about this? I won't give any advice, unless you positively require it."

"The money must be paid—" Mrs. Flemyng answered, in a weak broken voice; but more firmly than could have been expected. "It should be paid, if I had to live on your charity and Kate's, to the end of my days: and it's not so bad as that yet. It isn't the money I'm grieving over. I know I'm doing sinfully wrong in paying these gambling debts: it will only make him more rash and reckless. But perhaps my boy does not guess, how he has made his poor mother suffer. Oh—Tom—won't you try to make him understand this? It might save him, still. It's no use my writing. I'm afraid my letters only weary him, now. And he used to look for them so eagerly! But you will see him—will you not—and speak gently to him? He must have one soft spot left in his heart: *I* could always find it—once."

Tom shook his head, sadly. But he had not the heart to dissuade the unhappy mother from her purpose ; nor to tell her that she was only deceiving herself, now ; as she had deceived herself, since her spoilt darling grew out of childhood.

“ I thought how it would be—” he said, with a scarcely-suppressed groan. “ It’s clear there’s no use in my saying anything, except—that I’ll go up to Town, and arrange all this ; and do my very best to bring Vincent to his senses ; or at all events to bring him back here. I know—never mind why : I *do* know it—that I’m about the last person likely to soften him. You two may possibly do it. Anyhow, this *must* be the last of his gambling follies. If he can only be brought to understand this there will be some good done. Now I’ll leave you to Kate for awhile, mamma. When you feel strong enough, I’ll come back, and take your instructions to Deacon. He had better manage this of course ; though it will be a heavy day’s work for him.”

So Kate sent off a few lines to her brother,

time, she saw fit to disregard my advice, at least not to make me *participem criminis*. Hard words are seldom to be palliated, Mr. Seyton; least of all, hard words in a lady's presence. Yet, I think there are exceptions to this, as to all other earthly things."

Thus having perorated, the ancient took snuff thrice, with a kind of indignant emphasis; and paused solemnly for a reply.

"On my honour I think you were right:" Tom answered. "It's just what I'd have said myself to Mrs. Flemyng, if I had only had half your pluck. But those women do pretty much as they like with me; the proof of which is, that—I'm here to-day. The worst of it is, your refusing to act will not stop the business: it will only entail a fresh power of attorney, and further worry to Mrs. Flemyng, who is ill able to bear it. It seems to me that, if these things are to be done at all, they are best done quickly."

"*Bis dat, qui cito dat*," Mr. Deacon murmured. He always kept a stock on hand of trite Latin quotations, not much augmented since his

Westminster days; and rarely missed a chance of 'turning over' that modest capital.

"Exactly so," Tom assented, vaguely. "As the case stands, it would be a kindness to all of us, if you would undertake it. Indeed, I ask it as a personal favour."

The courtly old lawyer bowed his white head, stately.

"If you put it in that light, Mr. Seyton, I have not another word to say. The money shall be ready to-morrow."

So, with a few more words of special import, they parted.

Late on that same afternoon, after an unsuccessful attempt to find his brother-in-law at home, Tom was walking up Piccadilly. With that swift springy rustic stride of his—so different from the deliberate pace of the town-bred loungers—he went slipping past the main-stream of foot-traffic, now setting eastwards; till, nearly opposite Devonshire House, he overtook Mr. Castlemaine.

Now, Cis had a great respect for the squire-

time, she saw fit to disregard my advice, at least not to make me *participem criminis*. Hard words are seldom to be palliated, Mr. Seyton; least of all, hard words in a lady's presence. Yet, I think there are exceptions to this, as to all other earthly things."

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Now, Cis had a great respect for the squire-

archy in general; and considered Seyton of Warleigh a very favourable specimen of the order; so his greeting was far more cordial than might have been expected from their slight acquaintance: so cordial was it indeed, that Tom felt encouraged to prolong the conversation, with a purpose.

“If you are not in a great hurry, and have no particular engagement—” he said—“perhaps you could spare me five minutes?”

“Twenty if you like,” the other answered. “I’m too old to be ever in a hurry; and I’ve no business on hand, beyond a rubber or two before dinner; which, I daresay, may be postponed with benefit both to my purse and appetite. We’ll turn out of this turmoil, though, if you please: serious conversation is out of the question, here.”

So the two crossed the roadway and went down the steps leading into the Park. Directly they were on level ground, Seyton began to speak; coming straight to the point, as was his wont.

“I hate tale-telling out of school, as much as

you can do, Mr. Castlemaine. But I don't think the expression applies here. As to the main features of the case, we are only too well-informed. But I want to be sure that we know the worst. I am going to put a question to you, that perhaps I have no right to ask: I shall be greatly obliged if you will answer it frankly and fearlessly; but, if you decline to do so, I cannot feel aggrieved. I believe you are constantly meeting my brother-in-law, though you may not be especially intimate. Will you give me a candid opinion about him?"

Cecil looked steadfastly, yet not unkindly, into the other's face; while, for several seconds, he seemed to deliberate with himself as to the manner of his reply.

"Yes: you are perfectly justified in putting that question—" he said, at last, with the air of a judge giving a knotty point in a counsel's favour. "You like plain-speaking, Mr. Seyton, I know; and you shall have it. I consider that Vincent Flemyng is going to the devil, as rapidly and recklessly, as it is possible for a civilized man to

go. In all my experience—a long and varied one, unhappily—I cannot call to mind a more hopeless case.”

Tom’s countenance fell : he loved plain-speaking, certainly ; but he had not reckoned on such a downright dose of it. One may be very fond of cold water ; but an ice-cold *douche* is apt to stagger the stoutest of us, taken unawares.

“ I hope—I trust—it is not so bad as that—” he said. “ He has lost frightfully at play, we know. Indeed, I have come up, for the special purpose of settling those claims. He has said nothing of any trade debts : perhaps I may be able to help him out of these, without troubling his poor mother any further : she is almost heart-broken as it is. But there is a limit to everything. We cannot sit tamely by, and see Mrs. Flemyng beggared to feed Vincent’s gambling mania. These supplies are the very last. He must change his life entirely for many a day to come ; and live quietly, either at Warleigh or abroad. Even *he* will see the necessity of this ; indeed, I have promised not to return home

without him." Tom checked himself here, with rather an awkward laugh. "You must forgive me; I'm boring you with our family affair, as if you were an old friend."

"I take it as a great compliment—" the other said: and really he looked as if he did so. "I wish, from the bottom of my heart, that I could give any advice that would be useful. But you are quite wide of my meaning. Those who have lived my life, are apt to look upon mere money-scrapes only too lightly. Many worse things may befall us than unfraudulent bankruptcy. There is no question of dishonour in this case, I dare avow. I don't know the amount of Mr. Flemyng's losses; for they were chiefly incurred at private play: (whist and *écarté* are not fast enough for some of that set; they *will* have lansquenet and unlimited loo). But, I believe, no one doubted that they would eventually be paid. I was thinking of other entanglements. You say, 'you will take your brother-in-law home;' and keep him there, I conclude? If you do that, you will have worked nearly as great a miracle,

as if you had raised one from the dead. For all good and useful purposes, a man might as well be lying in his coffin, as bondsman to Flora Dorrillon."

There was something too much of hyperbole in these last sentences; but the earnestness of Cecil's manner saved them from seeming absurd. Seyton gazed at the speaker in a blank bewildered way. To the honest country squire these things were like glimpses into a new and evil world.

"The—the woman we met at Charteris Royal, you mean? Yes, I daresay, she might be dangerous." And Tom's face flushed guiltily, as he remembered how his own cool blood had been stirred by the syren-notes of *L'Andalouse*. "But I cannot realise such fearful fascination as this. Why—I was fool enough to rejoice, at the time, that Vincent seemed to have got clear of another scrape; a foolish flirtation with Mrs. Charteris."

"Mrs. Charteris!" the other retorted with some scorn. "She's only a thorough-paced

coquette; who can take right good care of herself, and will never do much harm to others. The Dorrillon is of quite another stamp. I can't tell you why she is so fatal; any more than I can explain, why some plants are poisonous. I only know the effect of her influence on certain men. By Gad, sir—you might have supposed they were 'possessed.' They seemed to lose all discrimination between right and wrong; and to forget that there ever were such things as natural affections. Did you know Livingstone of Kirton? You did not? Well: there was stuff enough in him to make half-a-dozen modern exquisites. That couldn't save him. There was a black story in his life that no one got at the truth of; and a burden was laid on his shoulders, that bent them—broad as they were. The Dorrillon was at the bottom of it all. She was hardly past girlhood then. What chance do you suppose a man of Flemyng's calibre would have with her, *now?* ”

Seyton hung his head despondently: he was quite in strange waters; and felt the absurdity

of arguing with such an experienced pilot as Castlemaine.

“How long has the *liaison* lasted?” he asked, in a low broken voice.

“It’s not exactly a *liaison*, in the vulgar sense of the word,” the other replied. “At least, I fancy not. Though I don’t profess to know more than other people, I’d lay heavy odds that Mr. Flemyng never has been, and never will be, what is commonly called ‘a favoured lover.’ But don’t deceive yourself; or think that you will find your task easier, for this. The Dorrillon would not be the witch she is, if she could not make her thralls feed on shadow for substance, till they die of famine. You can but try, at all events. Your best chance is, that I’ve a sort of idea she’s getting weary of your brother-in-law. Frankly—I don’t wonder at it. I wish you all success; and, if I can help in any way, command me. My best address is White’s.”

The other thanked him heartily; and then each went his way—Tom with a heavier heart than ever. Neither did Castlemaine feel in cue

for a rubber. He walked, slowly, to and fro in a quiet part of the Mall, till it was time to dress for dinner ; and, curiously enough, his appetite did not seem improved by the unwonted constitutional.

## CHAPTER IX.

### A LAST CHANCE.

SEYTON learnt at Vincent Flemyng's lodgings, that the latter had gone into the country for the day, and would not return till late at night: so he contented himself with making an appointment for the following afternoon; and spent the rest of the evening at his club, in the company of certain special cronies, who were wont to muster festively, on the occasion of Tom's rare visits to the metropolis.

But over the modest banquet there hung an unwonted gloom. The rumour of Flemyng's recent losses had been noised abroad; and more than one man present guessed at the cause of their friend's unexpected appearance, while Seyton himself was by no means in his usual spirits.

The troubles that he had seen—if not felt—within the last two years, up to which time his simple life had been singularly serene, were beginning to tell on his hardy nature. Certain maladies of mind and body work much alike, in this wise: they touch the healthy athlete who has never known sickness till now, far more sharply than the fanciful hypochondriac, or the feeble valetudinarian. If Seyton's own roof-tree was still unsinged, the fire had made wild work, of late, with his neighbours' dwellings; and, from the disaster of the last of these unlucky Ucalegons, he was divided by a thin party-wall. But if he could not contribute materially to the conviviality of the evening, he was careful to abstain from spoiling it. So he kept his own counsel: neither did his friends think it well to question him.

After visiting Lincoln's Inn, and his own banker's, Seyton came punctually to his appointment the next day; and found his brother-in-law alone. As might have been expected, their meeting was the reverse of cordial. Tom was a

miserable dissembler at the best of times ; and Flemyng had evidently wrapped himself up in defiant sullenness—the last refuge of a nature too weak to own itself in the wrong.

After a few words of purely formal greeting, Tom went straight to business.

“That is the sum you named, as sufficient to cover all your play-debts ?” he asked ; consulting a written paper.

The other nodded assent, silently, after a careless glance at the figures.

“Here it is—” Tom went on, drawing a roll of notes from his breast-pocket. “Will you be good enough to count it, and sign this receipt when you have done so ? Deacon says it must be placed in your mother’s deed-box, as a matter of form.”

The other did as he was bidden. As he pushed the signed receipt across the table, he was constrained to attempt some ungracious, reluctant thanks.

“Of course, I’m very grateful to my mother ; and to you, too, for the trouble ——”

"Don't thank me—" Tom broke in. "I wasn't consulted in this matter. What my advice would have been, had it been asked for, is of no consequence, now. If you wish to thank your mother, you can do so by deeds better than by words. She is very miserable; and would be yet more so, if I returned without you. These things are soon settled, with the money in your hand. Surely you will be ready to go down to Warleigh with me to-morrow, early—if not by to-night's mail. You need fear no annoyance from me: you know the others well enough to feel safe with them."

"I could not possibly get away to-morrow," Vincent answered. "I'll come down, for a day or so, as soon as I can manage it. But I can't fix any definite time."

"Can you be serious?" Seyton asked; with more of sadness than anger. "And I thought I was safe, in promising to bring you home with me!"

The other glanced up, with the old unpleasant look—half malignant, half timorous—in his eyes.

"You're never safe in promising for other people. If you mean, it was a condition—there's the money on the table. You can take *that* back with you."

Now, sooth to say, Seyton had been prompted more than once, during the last forty-eight hours, to make this especial stipulation, before actually parting with the notes. But his instructions did not warrant this; and poor Tom had absurd scruples about 'doing evil that good might come;' added to a nervous horror of dark and tortuous ways. So he put the temptation aside now, as he had done before. But the effort chafed him somewhat; and, before the other's cold callous selfishness, Tom's choler began to rise: his brows were bent, when he spoke again.

"I tell you, that your mother is really ill; and that I will not answer for the consequence of further mental suffering. Do you still refuse to accompany me; or to name an early day for your coming?"

Even Vincent Flemyng was fain to lower his

voice—for very shame—as he made reply : nevertheless, his tone was dogged and firm.

“I do refuse : whatever the consequences may be.”

Seyton's promise to his wife was utterly forgotten, as he rose up, with a wrathful scorn on his face, and in his clear grey eyes.

“Don't suppose that all this is a mystery to me. When half London could guess it, why should not I? I only heard the truth, when I heard that Flora Dorrillon's slaves were possessed with devils. What else could make a man let his mother die, and his sister pine, sooner than lose three days of a wanton's company. Sit down—you madman—you *shall* hear me out. (His strong arm thrust Vincent back into the chair, from which the latter had sprung in a sudden fury.) I know what you would say—she is pure in fact. As God hears me, I hold the woman who sins daily, from temperament—aye, even the outcast who sells herself nightly, for gold—higher than the pseudo-adulteress, who has made you the laughing-stock of the town.”

Never, in all his life, had Tom Seyton been so nearly eloquent: the composite word in the last sentence would scarcely have occurred to him, at another moment: but his fiery indignation made him speak as one inspired.

Flemyng's face had grown deathly white, and utterly disfigured with passion—passion that choked him, so as to prevent the articulation of a single intelligible word: his hand and wrist quivered like a bulrush, as he pointed to the door.

A moment's reflection caused Seyton to feel somewhat ashamed and conscience-stricken. It was clear he had made a false step in yielding to his honest impulses. What would you have? Even born ambassadors are but mortals; and our friend was never meant for diplomacy. However, he had now gone too far to recede; the words that had been spoken could neither be unsaid, nor atoned for, even if he had wished to do either. Scarcely suppressing a groan, Tom owned to himself, that he had no more business there; and that his best course, for the moment, was to depart speedily, before more harm was done.

“Look here, Vincent,” he said, in quite an altered tone—“I spoke unadvisedly a minute ago; and I’m sorry for it; though I can’t retract a word. But I’m as cool, now, as I ever was in my life. It just comes to this. If you choose to return with me to-morrow, or if you come to Warleigh within any reasonable time—free of this entanglement—you shall be as welcome as if nothing had happened. But, so long as your present intimacy with Lady Dorrillon subsists; you shall never see Kate, with my free will. I don’t forget that she is your sister; but I’m bound to remember that she is the mother of my children. You needn’t answer me, now, when there is bitterness between us. I shall not go down till to-morrow afternoon. If you think better of these things, meanwhile, you may know where a line will find me.”

Even as he spoke, Seyton moved towards the door—very slowly; for, in despite of all, he was loath to depart without drawing one word of repentance or concession from the man he had come to save. But, the twin-devils of Luxury

and Anger, who held Flemyng in their grip, would not let go their prey. Though the first tumult of his fury had subsided, his heart was not a whit more accessible to gratitude, or penitence, or shame. He only averted his down-cast head sullenly, and signified, with an impatient gesture, that he would be left alone.

Seyton had nearly reached the threshold, when he stopped suddenly, as if he had forgotten something. He came back, and placed a small roll of notes on the table, close to the pile that lay as they had been counted.

“There are my Crusader winnings,” he said: “every shilling of them. I meant you should have that money, from the moment I heard of your misfortunes. You’re not the less welcome, for all that’s been said and done. I hope it may be of some use to you; it would be none to me; so you need have no scruples. I couldn’t spend it—or keep it either—as things stand. I’m glad I remembered. I should have been miserable, if I had carried that stuff away with me.”

Vincent Flemyng—distraught as he was with evil passions, and debased by selfishness—was not wholly untouched by the simple-minded kindness of the action and words. For a brief instant, he liked Seyton better than he had ever done in his life; and felt half inclined to call him back, and accept—at least for the nonce—the moderate conditions of peace. But it was not to be.

Every Tyrolese or Alpine traveller knows those steep smooth grassy hill-faces—more dangerous, from their very seductiveness, than cliff, or ice-crag, or snow-slope—that have so many deaths to answer for. In these there is always one point, which if the victim has reached, it is not only impossible for him to retrace his steps, but equally impossible to arrest, were it for one second, his progress to destruction. People who have witnessed such accidents, say that this slow irresistible downward impulse, is the most horrible part of the whole catastrophe.

To such a stage in the moral precipice Vincent Flemyng had come. Whilst he paused, irreso-

lute, the door closed softly; and so from the doomed man was cut off the very last chance of repentance—the very last ray of hope, on this side of Eternity.

## CHAPTER X.

“WHO CHECKS AT ME, TO DEATH IS DIGHT.”

YOU remember, I daresay, that sad strange story, of the Scots lord, who early in life lost an eye, by accident, in a fencing-bout; and, years afterwards, was asked by the French king—

“Does the man still live, who wrought that injury?”

The debonair monarch meant nothing more by his idle question, than the words conveyed. But it was fatal to three lives; and brought shame and sorrow on more great houses than one. The crack-brained Baron interpreted it into a slur upon his honour. So he went home straightway; and, with the help of his servant, stabbed the unlucky master-of-arms to death in open day; for which murder both he and his accomplice paid on the scaffold. These good-natured blunder-

ing people are perpetually dropping firebrands in dangerous places ; and, afterwards, would freely sacrifice themselves to extinguish the flames.

• Speaking awhile ago—in some heat as you will remember—Seyton let fall an expression, injudicious, to say the least of it : could he have guessed *how* injudicious, sooner than have uttered it, he would have bitten his tongue through.

“ The laughing-stock of half the town.”

Cannot you imagine what manner of sermon the Devil would preach to a nature like Vincent Flem yng’s, on such a text as this ?

For a long half hour after he was left alone, the unhappy man sate brooding over his position and his fancied wrongs ; till he worked himself up into a savage dogged desperation. In that frame of mind, even weak and cowardly people become very dangerous ; and it is thus that such attain, not rarely, an evil eminence in crime. After a while he rose, with the air of one who has come to a settled purpose, and went forth ;

first casting the larger bundle of notes carelessly into a drawer, which he did not take the trouble to lock. But the smaller roll (which Seyton had laid down last) he thrust into his breast-pocket.

It was not very far from Flemyng's chambers to Plantagenet Square; where the family-mansion of the Dorrillons loomed, large, amongst its grand and gloomy fellows. He took the least frequented of the several roads thither; and encountered not more than two or three familiar faces by the way.

It so chanced, that one of these was Lord Ranksborough's.

Though they were by no means in the same set, they were in the habit of meeting pretty constantly; but there was not a whit more cordiality between them, than when they parted at Charteris Royal. No second play-tournament of the like importance had come off; but, upon the few occasions when they had been thus opposed to each other, Flemyng had invariably risen a heavy loser. So a gambler's superstition was

added to the other sources of his rancour. Denzil did not care to dissemble a sort of contemptuous dislike ; but, as a rule, he contented himself with ignoring the other, after the placid provoking fashion above alluded to.

He passed on, now, with a careless nod, and a brief muttered salutation. Of neither of these did Vincent take any heed ; and the black spiteful look that gave point to the rudeness, did somewhat astonish even the imperturbable peer ; who was unconscious of having given any fresh cause of offence. But he only smiled slightly ; and lounged languidly onwards ; musing as he went.

“What the deuce is up in that quarter, now, I wonder ? He’s an ill-conditioned beggar at the best of times : but I never saw that look in his eyes, before ; nor in any other’s that I know of. Yes : I did once ; in Transylvania, when we found that wolf-cub in the pit-fall. He must have been harder hit than any one gave him credit for. Or perhaps the Dorrillon drama is about coming to an end ; and the *jeune premier* don’t

fancy the prospect of being turned adrift. I should rather like to get at the truth of all that story. Marion keeps something back, of course : women always do. They wouldn't be half such sport, without their little reticences.”

With which philosophical reflection, Denzil let the subject ‘ slide.’

Lady Dorrillon's custom of an afternoon was perfectly well known to all her intimates ; and it was never varied unless for stringent reasons. She was too wise to take undue liberties with her magnificent constitution ; and so was wont, throughout the season, to come home early from her drive, that she might recruit herself for the fatigues of the evening. During this period of *quasi-siesta*, only a very few were admitted to her boudoir ; on which limited list Vincent's name was duly inscribed. So, he was conducted thither without pause or question.

That presence-chamber was very like a score of others that you and I may have seen : but the colours in the costly furniture and hangings were rather sober than brilliant ; and the light was

more subdued than is usual in such apartments. Certainly, this was not so regulated by the defensive cunning of coquetry; for Flora's superb beauty need not have shrunk from displaying itself under the fullest glare of lamp or sun. In other saloons, she met the fair company whom she entertained so royally. But this especial room she kept for *causeries intimes*, if not for real repose; and she held, that, for either of these purposes, semi-obscurity was useful.

Flemyng found Lady Dorrillon alone. She was reclining on a low broad couch, as if sleepy or weary. When he entered, her half-closed eyelids were lifted with a rather petulant sigh; and she scarcely disturbed herself sufficiently to motion him to a seat, placed conveniently close to her shoulder. Before he sate down—whilst the servant was still in the room—Vincent spoke hurriedly.

“Will you be ‘not at home’ for one half-hour? I *must* ask for so much of your time. I promise not to detain you longer.”

The words would have been rash and ill-

advised, even had they been warranted by greater familiarity, than existed between those two. And so Lady Dorrillon evidently thought: for her broad white brow contracted, at first; and her lip curled: but, suddenly, her purpose seemed to change.

“I am not at home, till I ring again;” she said to the servant, who waited in the doorway.

It was characteristic of the woman, that—in spite of her audacious coquetries, and reckless independence,—she should have been able to maintain her position so thoroughly in the eyes of her *valetaille*. The terrible *Vehme*, who deliberate below-stairs, had set no cross against her name; the austere matron in England could boast no more deferential or better ordered household. And this state of things never can prevail, where a single menial is supposed to connive at a guilty secret. So, the man went his way, without a suspicion on his mind, beyond a vague idea, that the visitor—having got into some serious scrape—had come to consult his mistress thereupon, or perchance to seek her aid.

"What is the terrible secret?" Lady Dorrillon asked, when the door was fairly closed. "For, of course, there is some fresh trouble?"

She put the question with a calm indifferent curiosity—not with the nervous eagerness of a woman, jealous even of a sorrow that she does not share.

He answered, with a forced smile.

"Nothing fresh—nothing new. Perhaps, that's the reason I'm sick and weary of it all—so weary that, one way or the other, it shall end to-day."

She too smiled by that same sign; but her smile was cold and fine.

"More cruelty of the cards? It's only wonderful, that you have not grown tired sooner of being persecuted. I believe, Fox thought losing at play the second pleasure in life. But you are no more like him, than—I am like the Duchess Georgiana."

"You're wrong for once," he broke in, rudely. "If I have been losing I can pay it, without troubling any one—you least of all; though you

did help me once. I've not come to ask you for money; but for a simple answer to a simple question. And that answer I mean to have.”

Her scarlet lip curled, more and more ominously; and into her eyes there came a dangerous light. But he was not to be warned; and went on in the same hard brusque tone—

“How much longer is this farce to last? How much longer do you expect me to live this dog's life, with less than a dog's reward? For you do pet and caress that snarling spaniel of yours sometimes; and *I* only gets miles and looks, that I dare swear are given to a score of other fools besides. I've served you long enough for nought. And I'll not be put off with fair words, now that I've come to ask for my wages.”

“You spoke of ‘farce’ first—not I; remember”—she said. “If it is a farce, there is the less reason for that high-tragedy manner. I tell you frankly—it don't become you; and it is not at all to my taste. So you are actually jealous of poor Rupert? Well: you have been so, with less cause. As to how long this is to last—

it hardly depends on me; unless you were to persist in being rude and disagreeable. Then, perhaps, I might have a decided opinion on the subject. You had better speak plainly. What is it that you do require of me?"

He did speak plainly, with a vengeance; so plainly, that few women—not wholly lost to self-respect—would have heard him to the end; so plainly, that the words cannot be written down here. He was nearly beside himself, when he came in, you will remember; and the careless insolence of her last speech fanned the smouldering madness into flame. But Flora listened without a frown, or blush, or a vestige of emotion.

"I will forgive your language—" she said; "simply, because you have made my answer so easy. I answer: No. No—now, and for evermore. The best hope that I held out to you was, that 'you might try and win me.' That hope has been over this many a day; only you would not see it. I promised you too, 'a fair field, and no favour;' and I have kept my word.

I hold myself clear, from this hour. It is not my fault that you have failed—utterly and irretrievably.”

The mingled malignity and anguish, that convulsed his face, were terrible to see.

“Then it’s all over? You cast me off at a moment’s notice, after—after all that has passed? And you do not fear the consequences? And you know that I am desperate?”

“I know nothing, except that this is the last time we meet *here*; or anywhere, unless it be in general society. No living man ever spoke to me twice—or ever shall speak—as you have spoken to-day. Why should I fear consequences? You can talk about me of course. I hope you will find some one to listen, if not to sympathise. A whole Book of Lamentations has been published about me, already; and yet—I survive. I don’t see what further harm you can do. I fancy you have no letters of mine, that would compromise me, even with Sir Marmaduke. Poor Marion! I wonder if she has grown wiser, for the lesson you gave her?”

The light broke in upon Flemyng all at once—not in a steady ray; but with a horrible blinding flash: he threw his hands up, clasping them tightly over his eyes, and sate so, for several seconds; when he withdrew them, both cheek and brow bore traces of the pressure. He just managed to stammer out a few disjointed words—

“My God—I see it all now: tricked—fooled—cheated from the first moment”——

And broke down, in a choking sob.

Not even then, did La Belle Dame Sans Merci abate the disdain of her satiric smile.

“Yes: I think you guess the truth, at last—” she said. “Marion Charteris came to me, in her distress; and I promised to help her; and to get those letters back, at any reasonable cost. It is hard for you, to hear these things, now. But—did you think to escape scot-free, after having tried to traffic on a woman’s weakness, and an old family’s honour? I did deceive you, in allowing you to think it possible, that you should ever be more to me than you were at that moment. But I did not mean to cheat you.

In one way, those letters were fairly bought and sold. Wait an instant.”

She opened a secret drawer in an escritoire placed close to her elbow, on the opposite side of the couch from that on which Flemyng sate; and took out a slip of paper.

“You know your own hand-writing? Here is the acknowledgment that my lawyer took, when he helped you out of your difficulties. I was very glad to be of use to you then; I have never grudged it since; and, when we came to an explanation, as we were sure to do, sooner or later, I always intended—this.”

The paper was scattered in shreds, before she had finished speaking.

If Flora Dorrillon could have seen what was passing within the other's breast, she would surely, I think, have refrained from that finishing blow; or, at least, have dealt it more tenderly. But Vincent Flemyng was fast lapsing into that state of mind, which finds its parallel in the last stages of certain bodily punishments; where prolonged torture does eventually produce

insensibility to pain. He made no answer now ; but sate like one bewildered ; drawing his breath in quick laboured gasps.

Flora looked at him in some surprise : she had despised the man too cordially, to believe him capable of such strong emotion. In despite of her ruthless cynicism, she was a thorough woman, after all. Mental agony she could witness, unmoved ; but she began to relent, at the sight of evident physical suffering.

“ We will let bygones be bygones, if you like,” she said, in a softer tone. “ At all events, we will forget that hard words have passed between us to-day. The world is wide enough for us both : we may meet, as hundreds of people do, who have no great respect or liking for each other. My philosophy is equal to this ; and so will yours be, when you have thought things over, coolly.”

Flemyng rose to his feet ; swaying to and fro like a drunken man : in his eyes was the same savage helpless look, which Ranksborough had aptly likened to the glare of a trapped wild beast.

Flora Dorrillon was absolutely proof against physical fear; nevertheless, she felt glad, just then, that a bell-rope lay within reach of her hand: she pulled it without an instant's hesitation.

Vincent broke out into a ghastly laugh.

“You needn't be afraid,” he said. “Did you think I was going to spoil your beauty? I couldn't, if I would: the Devil takes too good care of his own. I've time enough to say—all I want to say.”

With that, he leant down and spoke a few sentences in a hoarse suppressed tone: holding her arm fast the while. It was long before the firm white flesh lost the purple finger-prints: it was longer yet, before Flora forgot that hissing whisper, and the hideous words it conveyed: waking at night, with a start, she used to fancy that she heard it again, close to her ear.

Now, all cursing is evil; but evil, in degrees. There is the habitual expletive, meaningless if not harmless; perpetually exploding, like some unsavoury firework; such as the godly Scotch dame condemned—with a qualification.

“Our John does sweer awfu’—” she averred. “But, it must be owned, it’s a gran’ set-aff to conversation.”

There is the coarse execration of sudden anger; not deliberately malignant; and oftentimes repented of, as soon as it is spoken; which may be compared to the crackling of flame amongst thorns. Again—there is the slow intense imprecation of mortal hate or despair, into which a sinful soul casts all its strength of will; when each syllable falls like a drop of molten iron, and lies where it falls—burning, burning. Any man, who has been forced to listen to one of these last—even if it were not levelled at himself—will be apt to be disagreeably haunted thereby.

Did you ever read ‘The Lay of the Brown Rosary?’ If so, amongst the touches of weird horror that abound in that wonderful ballad, you will surely remember this verse—

A nun in the east wall was buried alive,  
Who mocked at the priest when he called her to shrive,  
And shrieked such a curse, that a stone took her breath,  
The old abbess sank backwards, and swooned unto death,  
With an Ave half-spoken.

Not more than a hundred words, perhaps, escaped just then, from those white, writhing lips of Vincent Flemyng's: but each one was heavy with venomous blasphemy.

Having uttered them—he did not pause to mark their effect; but straightened himself up, and left the room with a hurried unsteady step. On the threshold, he met the servant, coming to answer the bell; and well-nigh frightened the stolid domestic out of his propriety, as he brushed roughly past. The man could not have accounted to himself, at the time, for the curious feeling that impelled him to shrink aside out of Flemyng's way, as though there were danger in the touch of the other's garments. But, on the morrow—discoursing of these things amongst his fellows—

“I know what startled me, now;” he said. “I saw death in his face.”

Truly, it was so.

After much airy circling, the stately merciless falcon made her stoop at last; and the keen polished talons did their work, not negligently.

The stricken quarry might flutter away for a while, and gain the shelter of a covert hard by; but the mortal wound under its draggled plumage would not suffer it long to pine.

## CHAPTER XI.

### BLOOD-MONEY.

WITH the same swift unsteady step, Vincent Flemyng went down the staircase, and out through the hall; where two or three liveried servants—standing, decorously, at attention as he past—looked meaning comments at each other, on the abrupt departure. In the open air he began to collect his wandering senses; but he had walked round three sides of the square, and had nearly returned to the point whence he started, before he realised in what direction he was going. Then he halted, and seemed to reflect; passing his hand over his brow, in a bewildered way, as if trying to recollect something. This, he apparently succeeded in doing, at last; for he turned abruptly on his heel, and walked rapidly eastwards; taking, as before, the least frequented ways.

A quarter of an hour or so, brought him to his destination. The house he sought was situated in a dingy disreputable street, not far from Leicester Square. The ground floor was occupied by a small chemist's shop; and on the smirched plate of the door adjoining was inscribed:

MR. J. NISBET,

GENERAL PRACTITIONER.

Flemyng had evidently been here before; for he went straight into the shop; and, finding no one there, without further ceremony lifted a green curtain, and peered through the upper panes of a glazed door, into a room beyond.

The only tenant of that room was a pale middle-aged man; with long unkempt hair hanging over the collar of a rusty coat; at the first glance, you would have set him down as one, bankrupt in character not less than in purse; and you would have judged that his misfortunes were richly deserved. Mr. Nisbet was smoking a short black pipe with a kind of vicious energy; and on a table close to his elbow, were a spirit-

decanter, glasses and a jug of cold water. At the change of light, caused by the lifting of the curtain, he turned his head, with a sulky oath: he did not fancy being disturbed, for the sake of any business that was likely to come *his* way. When he saw who the visitor was, his brow cleared somewhat; and he rose quickly, to meet him.

A very few words will sketch Joe Nisbet's history.

When his father (who was in the same profession) died, he came into a fair sum of ready money, and a fair practice, in a small way. About this time he became acquainted with several of the artist-guild; these injudicious friends discovered—or professed to discover—in the unlucky Medico a decided talent for pen-and-ink caricatures. From that hour he never had a chance. He used to hang about the ateliers of a morning, spoiling quires of paper with his coarse sprawling outlines, and boring everybody for suggestions or appreciation; whilst his evenings were spent in uproarious revel with boon-com-

panions of tougher constitutions than his own. Of course, the ready-money took to itself wings, and fled apace; and the little practice followed thereafter. He never made enough by his etchings, to pay for a week's drink. One or two of his old comrades, who had risen somewhat in the world, lent him a helping hand now and then; and several employed him professionally; for he was not without talent of a rough kill-or-cure sort; but these fees came in very irregularly, according to the means or the memory of the patient. So, day by day, the wolf howled nearer to Joe Nisbet's door; and it was not likely that the hungry brute would be barred out much longer.

He was brooding over these things, and seeking solace in his wonted anodyne, when Vincent found him on that fatal evening.

"This is a surprise—" Nisbet said, with a coarse attempt at cordiality. "What brings a swell like you, to a den like this, just about your dinner hour? I'm glad to see you, any way. Sit down, old man. I've sent the boy

on a message : he won't be back for ever so long. So there'll be no one to disturb us."

Poor Joe lied from the mere force of habit. The boy in question—distraught by the lack of custom, and the utter hopelessness of drawing enough wages to keep him—had shaken the dust from his high-lows, outside that grimy threshold, months ago, for the last time.

Flemyng sate down, without speaking, on the chair the other set for him : for a minute or so, the two men sate staring at one another, till Nisbet grew uncomfortably nervous.

"Why the — don't you say what you want with me," he asked, half angrily. "It's physic, I suppose. There's something devilish wrong with you. I never saw that drawn, *hunted* look on your face, before. I don't like that dilation of the pupils. But if it's only late hours, and that sort of thing, that's playing the mischief with you, I can soon set you right. Let's feel your pulse."

But Flemyng thrust back the extended hand, rudely; and spoke almost in a whisper; never relaxing that fixed feverish stare.

"Yes: you're right. There *is* something devilish wrong with me; and I am come for physic. You won't guess what that physic is though. Listen, here."

In his turn, he put forth his hand; and, drawing the other closer till their heads nearly touched, murmured a few words in his ear. Suddenly, Nisbet wrenched himself roughly loose; and fell back in his chair with a sort of horror on his face.

"Are you—are you, mad?" he exclaimed. "Or what do you take me for?"

"I'm perfectly sane—" Vincent retorted. "And I take you for anything,—but the fool who would let such a chance slip. I know all about you, man. I know that you're nearer starving than I am: though all I can fairly call my own is—this."

He drew the roll of notes from his breast-pocket; and unfolded them deliberately on the table: amongst others was one for 100*l*. On this especial note Nisbet's dull watery eyes were riveted; till they lighted up with hungry

gleam : it was very long since they had looked on such a sight, even in dreams. An hour ago, he would have bartered his soul for half the price : now—it was only a question of life and death. No wonder that he began to hesitate.

“Is it—really—so bad as that?” he asked.

With a ghastly exultation the other watched the signs of yielding, and pressed his advantage. If true-hearted Tom Seyton could only have guessed, to what uses his Crusader winnings would come !

“Worse, than you can imagine. It just comes to this : if you won’t help me, I’ll hunt London over till I find some one who will. I believe there are a dozen, who would serve my turn, within a furlong of this house. And you know that, as well as I do. I haven’t patience for paltering. Say Yes, or No ; and have done with it.”

He laid his hand on the notes, as he spoke ; and began to fold them up again : but the other interposed—just as Vincent expected he would.

“Don’t—don’t be so hasty”—he muttered.

"You don't give a fellow time to pull himself together. Hold on a minute."

Then Nisbet filled a bumper with raw spirit, and finished it at a gulp: the deep fiery draught took instant effect, even on that seasoned brain.

"Have it your own way"—he cried out, with a noisy recklessness. "D—n it all! I don't know why I should be so squeamish. A man has a right to do as he likes with his own. After all, it's only what I've been thinking of for myself, these months past; and what, I daresay, I shall do, before the year's out. Hand over the stuff: you shall have what you want in three minutes."

With that, he reeled across the room, towards a press that stood in a corner. There he opened one drawer after another, till he found what he sought; muttering and mumbling under his breath, the while; and came back, with a short square vial in his hand. This he set down on the table; clutching the notes as he did so.

"It's the right article—" Nisbet said, with a

drunken chuckle. "I kept it for my own drinking."

Flemyng snatched up the vial, far more eagerly than the other had grasped the money; and secured it in his breast. Then he prepared to depart, silently; neither did Nisbet seek to detain him. But as he went out through the door, Vincent turned; and spoke again in a broken, quavering whisper.

"Will it—will it be much pain?"

The other answered, not in words; but only shook his averted head impatiently. And so those two most guilty men parted; without one word of farewell; and without once——after the price of blood was paid——meeting each other's eyes.

For a minute or two after Flemyng's departure, Joe Nisbet sate, gazing into the empty grate, with a stupid sottish stare. Suddenly, one of those strange reactions, to which the basest of brutalised natures are sometimes liable, overcame, and well-nigh sobered him. He sprang up, and dashed out through the sur-

gery into the street, bare headed: with a vague purpose of calling Flemyng back, and wresting away the accursed vial by main force. But no such figure appeared within sight. As if anticipating some such change of purpose in his accomplice, Vincent immediately on leaving the door, had plunged into one of the narrow by-lanes that abound in that neighbourhood; and even a detective would have had some trouble in tracking him. Ere long the open air began to make wild work with Nisbet's addled brain: as he staggered back into his dingy den, only a vague confused feeling of remorse possessed him; and this he proceeded to drown in more strong liquor, till he lay on the floor—a hideous crumpled heap.

It behoves the chronicler—wherever it is possible—to illustrate historical justice. Therefore, it is worth while to remark, here, that the blood-money thrived no better with Joe Nisbet, than it had done with more illustrious sinners: it seemed as though it had only served to grease the wheels of the rickety chariot, which he drove

down-hill, each day at more furious speed. He drank harder than ever ; but now chiefly alone. The uproarious joviality, and childish vanity, that in old days used half to annoy, half to divert, his intimates, quite disappeared ; he was always moody and morose now, when he was not noisily quarrelsome. He acquired a disagreeable habit too, of perpetually glancing back over his own shoulder, which caused one of his companions to ask, irritably, “ if he thought a sheriff’s officer was standing behind his chair ? ”

To which Nisbet retorted—with a savage glare at the questioner—that “ he was no more afraid of those cattle than any other man : and that before the other began to chaff, he’d better pay back that ‘ tenner ’ that had been owing these two years.”

After this, a general opinion began to prevail, that Joe was in a very bad way indeed : and was likely to be of little more social use or ornament. For he had never yet been known to dun a ‘ pal ’ or a patient ; and this outbreak of avarice

was set down as a certain sign of incipient softening of the brain.

These presages were very quickly fulfilled : in the course of the ensuing winter, Nisbet died ; leaving just money enough to bury him. His last illness was mercifully brief ; for he suffered not less in mind than in body ; and raved terribly at times. The chief of his visionary torments seemed to be, that his nostrils were never free from the faint oppressive odour of *bitter almonds*.\*

Flemyng would not trust his own feet, to carry him homewards ; and hailed the first hansom he met. As he drove along, his hand never stirred from his breast ; grasping, as a man grasps his last earthly possession, that costly vial. The day was waning fast : but there was left a good hour of twilight, when he got out at the door of his lodgings, and let himself in with a pass-key.

Breathing hard and painfully ; yet with a certain sense of relief and refuge—like a hunted

\*This phase of delirium was narrated to me, many years ago, by a very clever surgeon ; and he accounted for it only on the supposition of practised or intended murder.

buck that has just managed to struggle into cover—Vincent cast himself on the nearest couch; and, for a brief space, let his hot heavy eyelids droop over his aching eyes. Without that respite, he would scarce have been equal to the work he had yet to do.

## CHAPTER XII.

SCHRECKLICH DU BIST ALLEIN.

IN the career of some men—not of all—there is a certain hour; darker than any that have gone before; darker, perchance, than any that shall ensue; when the battle of life seems to turn so terribly against us, that even a wise and valiant veteran may be sorely tempted to cast away his weapons in despair, if not to wield them against his own bosom, after the manner of a deed done on Mount Gilboa ages and ages ago.

But, my brother, should we fall into so sore a strait, we might find, I think, a better example than that of the earliest Anointed King. Rather let us call to mind another story of old time. It matters little, if it be an idle legend. Romance, no less than History, may surely teach us a lesson.

It was the decisive battle; when all the strength of British heatheness was set in array against the Christian armies who came forth—nothing loth—from Camelot: the fight went on from early dawn to the going-down of the sun, when it was plain to all that the Red Cross must needs prevail. Then ensued a lull in the tempest, whilst the chiefest of the Round Table gathered round Pendragon, for the last dreadful charge. Then too the five kings, who led the Paynim host, unhelmed themselves to quench their thirst, at the same spring. For many and many a year those five had drank and warred together; and, now, they knew that they never more would drain wine-cup, or unsheath sword.

“Nathless—” quoth the chronicler—“when they saw it might not better be, they made scant moan or lamentation, and called upon their gods no more; but kissed, each the other, on the lips, and said farewell right kindly; then, being harnessed again, they set their backs against the wood, and, thereafter, gave ground no more than the pines.”

They were savage, stubborn misbelievers: yet the knightly saint, who alone was held worthy to look on the Holy Grail, could pray for no nobler ending.

It seems to me, that the case of no mortal is utterly desperate, who shall hold fast to these watch-words—Courage and Charity.

But amongst Vincent Flemyng's rare virtues, those two had never been numbered. So, now that the dark hour was upon him, he had to encounter it as best he might; for there were none to help or sustain.

The dusk was closing in fast, when he roused himself from that short stupor. As the power of connected thought returned, hazily, he began to recollect how, once at the Artist's Club in Rome, they had discussed the question of self-murder; and how a Frenchman had confessed that always in the twilight (*le crépuscule de la Morgue* he called it) he was sensible of a morbid depression, and of a terrible temptation which, sooner or later, would surely overcome him. He recollected, too, how all had made sport of that

sombre fancy ; and how he himself had prayed the other, in case the presage should be fulfilled, to record on paper his last sensations, "for the benefit of science, and the instruction of subsequent suicides." Since then, Alcide Desmarets had risen rapidly to eminence amongst landscape painters ; whilst he, Vincent Flemynge——

How pleasant they were, though—those Roman days ; when—foremost at least, if only one of many—he followed in Marion Charteris' train. It was folly of course ; but harmless folly : better, a thousand times, than the feverish ague-fits of heat and cold, that had tormented him for months past. Why not have left well alone ? For it was his own rashness, in turning the screw too hard, that caused its threads to give way ; so that all hold was lost. With a fresh sharp pang, came back the memory of Marion's bitter scornful glance, when she rose up in revolt against his dictation, and defied him to do his worst. No doubt, from that very moment, she had begun to plot—all that had happened since. Then he cursed her aloud ; not with the intense malignity which had

marked his last words to Flora Dorrillon, but carelessly and contemptuously; as a hasty man might swear at the impediment that had caused him to stumble. What a blind idiot he must have been — not to have suspected concert between these two women. How they must have laughed at him. Would they laugh to-morrow—hearing what the night had brought about? Perhaps Marion Charteris would be a little penitent and sorry; as for the other—Once more, those awful blasphemies rose to his lips, and gurgled forth, like bubbles from a broken blood-vessel.

Darker and darker. Surely the night was closing in faster than usual. He would have lights, instantly. There would be time enough for dreaming when his business was done.

The servant who answered the bell, did not notice anything strange in his master's manner; but he remembered, afterwards, that when the lamp was brought in, Flem yng moved quickly to the further side of the room, and began to pull out one volume after another, from the book-case; keeping his face studiously averted. Also there

was a thick indistinctness in his voice, as though it came through mufflings, when he told the other that "he should not dress for dinner, nor require him any more that night." He seemed nervously impatient too, whilst the man lingered, to set one or two things in order; and, at last, bade him begone, angrily. Directly Vincent was left alone, he unlocked the drawer which held the bank-notes; and began to arrange them in parcels; referring, as he did so, to a list scrawled down on a certain page in his betting-book.

It was a very large sum, that lay before him there: so large, that many hopeful enterprising men would ask no more, for the foundation of a fortune: with far less, adventurers have crossed the Atlantic or the Indian Sea; and returned, richer than Drake, when he came to his moorings after a cruise on the Spanish Main.

To such men—especially had they been hampered by few moral scruples—there would have been a very powerful temptation in those bundles of crisp fluttering paper; they would have been loth to abandon the certain enjoyments, and

probable advantages to be extracted therefrom. Here was enough to make an entirely fresh start on, in a fresh track, where a bold outlaw's antecedents need not tell heavily against him; even if they were known. Why not let the creditors wait, as most of them could well afford to do? If fortune only smiled once more, every debt should be paid in full. After all—any moonlight flitting is better than a leap into the dark.

Thus, I repeat, would many men have discoursed with themselves; but, so did not Vincent Flemyng. His conscience had become conveniently silent of late; and, as you will have remarked, his sense of honour was singularly dull; nevertheless, from such a temptation as has been just described he was wholly free.

Does this tell for, or against him? It would be hard to say. Perhaps—putting, as was aforesaid, honesty entirely out of the question—the latter view of the case would be the truer one. In time of trial he had always lacked hope and enterprise: with both of these he had now done, for evermore. The slow poison that had circu-

lated in his veins from the moment that he had yielded himself up, body and soul, to a guilty passion, wrought its work very thoroughly: the last fatal symptoms were evinced in that dull, dogged despair.

Certain it is, that from his one fixed idea the unhappy man never varied. He completed his task with perfect outward calmness and deliberation; wrapping each parcel of notes in a sheet of paper, on which were inscribed the amount of the debt, and the usual formula—"With Mr. Flemyng's compliments."

In that very act of courtesy, there was a touch of the straining after stage-effect, which, from boyhood upwards, had been prominent amongst Vincent's most harmless frailties. Furthermore, it was noticed by several whose debts were cancelled then and there, that the envelopes were addressed in a peculiarly even and unwavering hand.

When all was finished, Flemyng cast himself back in his chair with a weary groan; and closed his eyes once more. But at the same moment, his finger clutched the vial that was

still concealed in his breast; as though touch were needed to assure him of its safety. After a while, his lips began to work and move; at last he muttered aloud—

“I ought—I will do it.”

With that he drew a fresh sheet of note-paper towards him; and began to write, hurriedly: these were the words he wrote:—

“I write these lines; because I wish that you should know all the truth; and lest you, or my mother, or Kate should fancy that there has been any reason—but one—for this night’s work. I swear, that my losses, which are paid to the uttermost farthing, have nothing to do with it. It is true that I am ruined: but I would have lived on, as a pensioner, even on you, rather than go—where I am going—if something had not happened, since we parted. The threat in the letter in which I asked my mother for money, was a lie. I had never thought of dying—then. You will decide, whether it will be better to keep what I tell you now from my mother and Kate: but you *must* believe me.

“You were right, ten thousand times over, in what you said about Flora Dorrillon. She, and none other, has brought me to *this*. I leave my blood upon her soul; and, if I thought any prayer of mine would avail, I would pray, that it might rest there, till—we two meet again. I should like her to hear this, and hear it from you. Not that she will care. But it is my last wish, nevertheless: therefore, I think you will fulfil it. You will take charge of my mother, I know: it will not be easy work; but you have both sense and courage: and, for years past, you have been more of a son to her than I. You see, I do you justice, very late in the day; and I thank you for what you have done, and would have done to help me. Your money did me right good service; though you never will guess how. I wish we had been better friends: that we were not so was my fault; like all the rest of it. I can see that much now. Farewell. “V. F.”

“You will see that the other letters go safely to their addresses—unopened? There is nothing but money in any of them.”

He wrote these lines, without check or pause : it seemed as though he were afraid to trust himself to reflect over much on their meaning : then he placed them in a sealed envelope, which he directed to Tom Seyton ; with the superscription —“ To be delivered immediately.”

Having done this, he rose, and began to pace up and down, in the quick restless manner that denotes irritation, or tremor of nerves. After a score of turns or so, he stopped abruptly by the mantel-piece, and lighted one of the candles that stood thereon. With this in his hand, he passed through his bedroom and dressing-room, into the *atelier* beyond ; which was built out in the rear of the house. It was a large lofty chamber lighted chiefly from above ; and cheerful enough by day ; but it was never intended for nightwork, and would have looked gloomy, even if illuminated by a dozen tapers, instead of the solitary one that Flemyng carried. Against the walls hung or stood several sketches in water-colours, and one or two unfinished pictures in oils : each and every one, in whatever

stage, bore the same stamp of crude negligence, added to an evident lack of power.

Vincent passed from one to the other of these ; scanning each in turn with a deliberation that savoured of criticism ; before he came to the last, his lip wore a smile—half scornful, half melancholy.

“What utter trash!”—he said aloud, with some bitterness. “And to think, that I chose this, for a profession ! If I had worked ten times harder, I should have spoiled ten times as much canvas—that’s all.”

Very, very late—too late to be of the faintest avail—self-knowledge and self-appreciation came. If the strange sad humility which now possessed Vincent Flem yng, had visited him, but a year ago ne, the manner both of his life and death would surely have been other from that which did befall.

But I do not wish to make him out a whit better than he really was. Even at that moment—realizing that his whole career had been a mistake, and more or less an imposture—he felt

rather fain to blame fortune or luck, or the injustice of others, than to impute the failure to his own deficiency both in moral principle and intellectual power. Furthermore, his regrets were purely selfish. Over his own defeats he was ready enough to make moan : but he could share no regrets for the hopes he had disappointed, or for the affections he had misused and trampled on ; no remorse for the blow that his crowning act of guilt would surely deal to those two loving women, who had borne and forborne so long—to be repaid, in this wise, at the last ; unless such a feeling were vaguely apparent in an unconquerable reluctance, to write to either of them a single word of farewell.

On an easel, in the further corner of the *atelier*, a picture stood by itself : it was larger than any of the others ; and covered with a crimson cloth. Vincent drew this roughly aside ; and there was revealed a half-length portrait, of life-size. Whose portrait it was, the hastiest glance would tell you.

Very rarely in the beauty of living woman, are

the imperial and the voluptuous so strangely mingled; more rarely still, is found such subtle provocation, underlying soft treacherous languor, as gleamed from beneath the dark sweeping fringes of Flora Dorrillon's fatal eyes. The dress too, of deep blue velvet—the bodice cut square, after the old Venetian fashion—dissembled no perfection of her superb figure; and the effect, though fantastic, was infinitely becoming, of an Etruscan fillet, in gold and enamel of many colours, twined in and out amidst a fabulous luxuriance of braids and tresses.

Out of such a subject, it would have been difficult for any one, who could wield a brush even decently, to make a thoroughly common-place picture: coarse or rigid, or unnatural as a bungler's efforts might have appeared, you would still have been aware that you were gazing on the semblance of a loveliness almost without peer. In this portrait, Flemyng had fairly outdone himself: there was none of the weak washy 'prettiness,' which has been before mentioned, as disfiguring his best efforts: there was decided character

about the whole performance, and marks of real artistic power. Something of the same influence, which urged Quentin Matsys on to renown, had surely been at work, here; but as the passion differed, so also did the painter's endings.

Vincent stood before his handiwork (only a few finishing touches were needed to complete it now), gazing thereon long and searchingly. The scrutiny under that dim light seemed to tantalize him: he set the taper down, and lifting the canvas from the easel, carried it carefully into the sitting-room that he had lately quitted. The lamp was burning brightly there; but Flemyng lighted two more wax-candles, and placed them, so that their rays fell full on the face of the portrait, as it rested against a chair close to the head of a couch. On that same couch, Vincent sate down; resting his elbows on his knees, and his chin on his clenched hands; and once more his eyes became fixed in an eager haggard gaze. His musings wandered hither and thither (for power of concentrated thought he had none); but—flutter where they would—like

birds fastened to threads of uncertain length, they always reverted to the same point.

On that figure and face, he never would look again.

Suddenly, he began to wonder, where she was at that moment—what she was doing—whom she was talking to—how she was dressed? With a vast effort, he constrained himself to question his memory calmly, but he recollected that to-night there was a great banquet at a certain Ambassador's at which the Dorrillons would, surely, be present. Not less surely, *he* would be present too—that accursed Austrian; the very sight of whom had been sufficient of late to cast Vincent Flemyng into a jealous fit, not the less violent, because it had been perforce suppressed.

The said Secretary had created no small sensation that season: he was quite fascinating enough in many ways, to justify the evil reports of seductive success which had preceded him to England. With this reputation to keep up, he was bound to be cautious in his selection of a first victim. So, good-natured people said, he had hitherto

abstained from pursuit of meaner game; intending to match himself against the Queen-Falcon of all, and to try 'conclusions of flight' with the Dorrillon. These whispers had reached Flemyng's ears, of course, and had made him more than uneasy; though he had never ventured to broach the subject to Flora: they came back again now, with a fearful substance and significance.

Probably, that serene handsome face was close to hers, at this very instant; and that trailing golden moustache—from under which the low soft voice could steal forth so winningly—closer ye to her ear. There was to be a ball afterwards, too and the Austrian was one of the famous waltzers of Europe: Flora had more than once expressed her appreciation of his step and style. Would she fail to improve the opportunity of to-night? What a question! So, amidst light and music, there would be smiles, and whispers, and confidences, and concerting of plans for future amusement—if nothing more; and perchance, pressure of locked fingers, before all was done; whilst

he, Vincent Flemyng, was left—alone—with his despair.

As the paroxysm over-mastered him more and more, he fairly gnashed his teeth ; and sprang to his feet, glancing round for a weapon, as if she stood there in flesh and blood before him, and it were in his power to mar that fatal beauty. His eye lighted on a long Turkish dagger—one of the many toys he had brought from the East—which lay unsheathed on a table near : it usually did duty as a paper-cutter. In three seconds more, the canvas, that it had been a labour of love to cover with deftly-blended colours, hung, gashed and torn : the hands that were slow and faltering in creation, in annihilation were rapid and sure enough : no mortal eyes could have traced in those unsightly shreds and patches, the late not unworthy semblance of *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*.

But the sudden frenzy soon spent itself ; and then, Vincent stood staring blankly at the ruin before him with the shame-stricken regret of one who has madly destroyed or cast away his most

precious earthly possession. As he cast himself down on the couch again, his lips began to move; and these words were just audible—

“It is full time, I were gone.”

Once more, his fingers closed round the vial; but this time he drew it forth; and looked at it fixedly. One would have thought his face could grow no paler: yet while he so gazed, it *did* whiten, till the very lips were bloodless; and he fell into a nervous tremor.

Let me speak the truth even to the miserable end. They were not terrors of the Unseen World; nor the natural shrinking of a mortal on the threshold of immortality; nor a dread of merited wrath to come, that were assailing him then. Vincent Flem yng died—as he had lived for years past—a professed and consistent infidel. The aspen-shiver that shook him from head to foot as he lay came from simple physical fear: he flinched before Death as he would have quailed before the onset of a strong-armed man. He was himself sensible of this; for he sought encouragement in repeating aloud—

"It will be no pain. He said, it would be no pain."

At last he rose, unsteadily; and taking a spirit-decanter from a closet hard by, drained three large glasses of brandy in succession. The first had no perceptible effect: with the second a feverish glow rose on his cheeks, and the tremor of his limbs ceased as though by magic: the third went straight to his brain.

If human ears had been within reach of that shrill mad laugh, help might possibly have come in time; but it only startled the night.

"I can do it—now."

Even as the words passed his lips the poison was set thereto; and the work was done.

A long choking gasp—a slight noise of shivering glass—a dull smothered crash as Flemyng's head struck the cushion of the couch heavily. Then—that awful intensity of silence which prevails only in a chamber where an unwatched corpse is lying.

The lamp grew dim and black; and the tapers flickered out; and the moon peered in for awhile

tarrying not long; and a misty grey dawn swiftly gave place to a brilliant summer-day. But, through all the changes of light, yonder clear waxen mask altered not in its serene beauty; so serene—that it was hard to believe, its wearer had ever known sin, or shame, or sorrow.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### BLOOD-RECKONING.

THE woman whose duty it was, each morning, to set those chambers in order, was the first to discover the deed that had been done. She gave the alarm, of course, after the fashion of her kind, with loud wailing and outcry. Flemyng's servant (who did not lodge under the same roof) was on the spot before the confusion had subsided. The man had sense and coolness enough to see in what direction his own duty lay. Without waiting the arrival of the doctor, who was summoned purely as a matter of form, he went straight to Seyton, with the letter addressed to the latter in his hand.

Tom was not particularly matinal in his habits, when in town; he was sleeping soundly

when the messenger of evil tidings broke unceremoniously into his room. It is at all times very hard to realise the death of one whom we left in full health and strength, but a few hours ago: it is especially hard, when the news comes to us at our waking. The shock was not only more severe, but so utterly different from any that Seyton had ever experienced, that for awhile he was thoroughly bewildered; and sat staring stupidly at the address of the letter; without breaking the seal. At last he recovered himself sufficiently to answer the servant's repeated enquiry as to "what was to be done?"

"Wait outside for a few minutes—" Tom said. "I'll be able to tell you better, when I've read this. I must read it, alone."

And he did read the letter—word by word, syllable by syllable—twice or thrice over: when he folded it up mechanically, he could have repeated every line by heart. His self-possession had quite come back by this time; and, whilst he dressed hastily, he questioned the servant, as to the little the latter had to tell, and gave concise

directions as to what was immediately to be done. Within half-an-hour he was at Flemyng's lodgings. The doctor, whom Seyton found there, had also very little to say. Life had evidently been extinct for some hours before he was called in; and it was evident that instantaneous death had been caused by an unusually powerful dose of prussic acid.

"I'm very much afraid, one of my own profession might be brought in as accomplice before the fact—" the doctor said. "There were a few drops left in the broken bottle; and it must have been of a peculiar shape, too. I feel certain that poison was never obtained from an ordinary chemist: they dare not sell it to any man, who could not show a diploma. But, it would be next to impossible to trace it. And, I suppose, in these sad cases, least said is soonest mended. You have no evidence of the deceased's state of mind, I presume."

This last question Seyton did not think it necessary to answer. He simply remarked, "that it could make little difference where the poison

was obtained; and that he was most anxious to avoid publicity, so far as it could conscientiously be done. If the doctor would tell him, what formalities were necessary, they should be complied with at once."

Then the two went in together into the room where the body lay—on the same couch, and almost in the same posture as it had been found, only a white kerchief was cast over the face. Seyton drew this gently away; and gazed down steadfastly on the delicate features—now more than ever refined in their unearthly beauty. The fair white brow was smooth, as if it never had frowned; no trace of evil tempers lingered round the chiselled lips, on which the faint death-smile had just begun to dawn; and the dark restless eyes were veiled, for ever, under the lids that seemed to have settled down, so wearily. It was a picture, that even a stranger could hardly have looked upon, unmoved. The doctor, albeit unromantic by nature, and case-hardened by rough professional work, was surprised into a pitiful sigh.

“He must have been a very handsome man—”  
he said, softly.

The words were not especially sympathetic; but they were so evidently meant in kindness, that Seyton turned towards the speaker, with more gratitude than if the other had attempted a set speech of condolence, as he answered in a broken voice.

“He *was* very handsome. And so like his mother: I never knew *how* like, till now. Only think, what this will be to her! She has no child left, except my wife. They both almost idolized him. We were never such good friends as we ought to have been—he and I. He says, it was his fault—poor fellow! I believe, it was rather mine. I’m too rough and clumsy to deal with anything—or anybody—that needs delicate handling. Even now, I came up to town to help him—indeed I did; yet, I fear, I only made matters worse. I think bungling does as much harm as malice in this world; if not more.”

It was like Tom Seyton’s indiscretion—making family confidences to an utter stranger, from

whom he had no right to expect a shadow of sympathy. But the doctor was not inclined to quarrel with that simple expansiveness, or even to deride it; neither—saving your worship's critical presence—am I.

After seeing to some necessary business, (such as looking over papers and the like,) and forwarding the different letters to their addresses, Seyton went out; saying that he should not be gone more than an hour.

He walked straight and swiftly towards Plantagenet Square; yet it was past noon when he got to the Lady Dorrillon's door; and her groom was already in waiting, with her saddle-horse. A call at such an hour would have been a social anomaly, even had the visitor been on the 'familiar' visiting-list; but the staid servant who took Seyton's card, merely said that "he would inquire if her ladyship was at home." It appearing that such was the case, Tom was conducted at once into the smallest of several reception-rooms on the first-floor. Almost immediately, Lady Dorrillon joined him there;

fully equipped in her riding-gear. There was both surprise and expectation on her face ; but her smile was very gracious, and she held out her hand cordially : for she had rather liked what she had seen of her visitor, during his brief sojourn at Charteris Royal. That same surprise was disagreeably increased, when she saw her courtesy wholly unnoticed, if not actually repelled : so her first address was, perforce, cold and constrained.

“ This is an unexpected pleasure, Mr. Seyton—only from the earliness of the hour, of course. Is there anything I can do for you ? Or have you any message for me ? ”

Some suspicion of the truth, though not of the whole truth, shot across her mind, just then. She guessed that Seyton had come to speak to her, concerning Vincent Flemyng, before he placed the letter that you wot of in her hand—speaking never a word.

She read it through, almost as carefully as Tom himself had done : though her countenance neither fell, nor changed perceptibly, it was

nearly colourless, when she came to the end. As she read one especial sentence, (you may easily guess which one) she could not repress a shudder ; it seemed so like the ratifying of the curse, that was hissed into her ears a brief while ago.

“In Heaven’s name, what has happened?” she asked.

“Heaven has little to do with this matter, except it be to punish,” Seyton answered. “Nothing has happened that *you* need feign surprise at, if the words written down there are true. And dying men do not often lie. I believe, that within an hour after those lines were penned, Vincent Flem yng had gone to his account, with the guilt of self-murder added to his other sins.”

It was scarcely remorse which overcame Flora Dorrillon just then ; but rather the natural horror which causes us to shrink from the contact of any funereal sign or emblem ; added to those same pitiful instincts of womanhood, which, as you know, were not wholly crushed within her. In the course of her career she had incurred, once, if not oftener, the stain of blood-guiltiness

in the second or third degree ; but now, for the first time, she was brought abruptly face to face with death—death, plainly imputed to her. She covered her eyes with her hand, and Seyton could barely hear the words——

“ It is *too* terrible. I never guessed—Indeed, I am innocent of this, as you can be.”

“ So the Law would say, doubtless ”—the other retorted—“ at least, the Law as written by man. Even I do not accuse you of having instigated the crime ; or of having furnished the poison. It is also possible, that yonder suicide never warned you of his intention, when last you met. Yet, none the less do I believe that God will hold you accountable for the deed done last night ; and that you will have to answer it, sooner or later.”

The sudden horror that had quelled Flora Dorrillon for an instant had passed away now, and her haughty spirit asserted itself once again. She lifted her head, with the imperial disdain that her enemies knew so well : it was evident she would brook little more of that rough plain-speaking.

"I am too shocked by this intelligence," she said, quietly; "not to make great allowances for your excitement. But I cannot allow you to go on in that tone. You are under some extraordinary delusion. I repeat, distinctly, that I have no more to do with this miserable catastrophe than yourself. If you will listen patiently, I think you will be forced to do me so much justice. Soon after we met at Charteris Royal, I saw that I had made a strong impression on poor Vincent Flemyng: indeed, he avowed this to me. I did not check or repel him, I own, as of course I ought to have done. Why I did not do so, signifies little now. Perhaps I wanted amusement; or I fancied——"

Seyton could contain himself no longer: he had over-stepped the bounds of ceremonious courtesy at the very beginning of the interview; and grief and indignation waxed hotter within him, as the contrast smote him between the superb beauty, full of luxuriant life, and the set bloodless face he had looked upon so lately.

"Amusement—and fancy——" he broke in. "Is

it possible that you can use such words; knowing that your indulgence of a whim has destroyed a man, body and soul; and brought shame and misery on two women who never injured you, or any living creature?"

Now, as you are aware, it would have been easy for Flora to justify herself, partially, here. She could have shown, that she had acted, at least, with a purpose, and that deception on one side had only foiled deliberately base intentions on the other. That she forebore to vindicate herself by further damaging the memory of the dead, is scarcely to be imputed either to tenderness or remorse. She had plenty of that pseudo-generosity, which can be liberal out of what costs the giver nothing. The same feeling which had prompted her to help Flemyng in his difficulties, with a loan which she never meant should be repaid, kept her silent, now. When every possible fantasy was provided for, money was to her no more than glittering sea-sand; and about the good opinion of the world in general she had learnt to be scornfully indifferent. So that in

neither case was there involved a very precious sacrifice.

She accepted the rough interruption with admirable temper.

“It will be better that you should hear me out patiently. I did encourage your unhappy brother-in-law, at first, to a certain degree. But, even then, he had no right to expect that he could ever be more to me than a familiar friend. When I saw that this would not satisfy him, and that each day made him more unreasonable and exacting, I really tried to make him understand the utter hopelessness of his pursuit. I am guilty of coquetry, of course, but I do not think you ought to use a harder word. Could I dream that his folly—and mine if you will—would end so terribly? Before he came here yesterday, something had nearly maddened him. I thought it might have been ill-luck at play: but he denied this. I cannot tell you all he said: I do not wish to remember: but he used words, for which I would never forgive any living man. This much I will tell you. He required of me,

for his sake, to forget my marriage-vow, and to sacrifice my honour. Answer me this one question frankly. If I had known that, only by so doing, I could prevent the other crime he meditated, would you have counselled me to yield?"

A subtler logician than the sturdy Marlshire-man might have been puzzled by that dilemma. With an inward groan of helpless perplexity, Tom owned himself utterly baffled.

"I'm a poor hand at casuistry"—he said, bluntly. "And, I thank heaven, coquetry is so strange to me and mine, that I know nothing of its laws, nor of how far people may go without breaking them. You have the best of the argument, on the face of it. But—if leading one of God's creatures into a maze, from which self-murder is the only outlet, be not a mortal sin—my notions of right and wrong are arbitrary. Look here, Lady Dorrillon: it's easy enough to entangle an advocate of my calibre with your special-pleading. You might find it harder work with others—aye, even with your own husband."

A slow, quiet voice spoke close behind them.

"That we shall see, presently. What you have further to say, Mr. Seyton, had better be addressed directly to me."

Turning in surprise and amazement, Tom found himself face to face with Sir Marmaduke Dorrillon. With his spare erect figure and rigid features, framed in the dark-curtained doorway, the new-comer looked like some grim master-piece of Holbein.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### ICH DIEN.

I THINK, if the truth were known, it would be found that John of Bohemia came to his end from an arrow shot at a venture, or a chance blow. Surely none of the stout English hearts, who 'bare up the fray' at Créci, would wittingly have harmed the brave blind old man, when he rode into the thickest of the lost battle to deal one more darkling sword-stroke.

So, in wordy warfare, certain veterans command forbearance, if not respect, from their adversaries. Under any ordinary circumstances of controversy, Seyton would have welcomed the advent of a masculine opponent not less sincerely than that of a fresh ally. Now, he felt rather embarrassed than relieved; for very pity, he would have avoided this second en-

counter, had it been possible : but it was too late.

As Sir Marmaduke came forward, a close observer might have noticed an unusual stiffness and tardiness in his movements ; the measured deliberation with which each step was planted could not conceal a tottering uncertainty of gait. Sitting down in an arm-chair close to his wife's side, the Baronet spoke again.

" I do not apologise for intruding, nor for having listened to the latter part of this conversation ; because I think that no one has a better right than myself to be here. From words that I overheard—strange words to be used in such a presence—I infer that some terrible calamity has happened. I wish to be informed of its nature, at once."

Seyton hesitated, as if loth to answer. But Lady Dorrillon had no such scruples. Her tone was perfectly calm and assured ; though sad and hushed, as befitted the occasion.

" It is a very terrible calamity. Vincent Flemyng committed suicide last night, by poison.

Before he died, he wrote this letter. There is only one passage in it which concerns you or me."

On that passage she laid her finger, as she passed the open letter over to her husband.

Sir Marmaduke bent his head as he took it, with the formal politeness that was part of his nature; and which was displayed no less towards his nearest and dearest, than towards the rest of womankind. Very deliberately, too, he unfolded a massive gold eye-glass, and began to peruse the lines indicated. It appeared that, even with this aid, his sight was strangely dim; for a long epistle might have been studied, in the time that it took him to grasp the meaning of those few simple words. As he pored over them, a faint flush began to rise on his high pale forehead: much like that produced by the pressure of a hard heavy cap; only it was marked on the lower part of the brow.

"A fearful catastrophe, indeed"—he said at last, with an evident effort; after clearing his throat several times, huskily. "None can regret

it more sincerely than myself; nor sympathise more sincerely with your affliction, Mr. Seyton. But, I must ask—is it on this evidence alone, that you have ventured to impute to Lady Dorrillon any responsibility in this matter? ”

Tom was compelled to come to the front, now: he did so, sturdily, if reluctantly.

“ That is the only evidence. But, surely, it is conclusive. Vincent Flemyng had many faults and failings: but—that he was capable of penning a groundless calumny within a few moments of plunging into Eternity—I cannot believe. Can you? ”

He looked the other keenly in the face, as he put the point-blank question. Sir Marmaduke flinched not a whit.

“ Mr. Seyton; should there be any inquiry into your relative’s death, I presume the verdict that you would strive to ensure would be—Temporary Insanity. In such a verdict I feel able, conscientiously, to concur. Were it otherwise—I should not scruple, now, to affirm, that yonder unhappy man, before he went to his account, added to his

other misdeeds, a cruel and malicious falsehood."

Seyton was nearly provoked into a hasty answer, but he had sense enough to refrain: moreover, he saw that words would be wasted on such hopeless obstinacy as this.

"Am I to understand then"—he began.

Sir Marmaduke rose to his feet; leaning heavily on the back of his wife's chair, as if he needed some support. When he had drawn himself up to his full height, the tremor in his limbs ceased altogether, and his tall frame was rigid as steel. But that strange flush on his forehead was ever mounting and darkening. He stretched forth his hand—as it were, in warning or deprecation—whilst he spoke, with a grave courtesy, not devoid of dignity, in spite of its old-fashioned and somewhat overstrained formality.

"Pardon me for interrupting you, Mr. Seyton," he said, in a cold measured voice. "My only reason for so doing, is my wish that no needless rancour should subsist between us; even if we must be strangers from this hour. I do not

wish to hear another word from you, on this subject, lest it should be such as I could not forgive. And, I pray you to believe, that I would not with any word of mine, knowingly, hurt or offend you. But thus much it is my duty to say. You asked, I think—‘ how Lady Dorrillon would justify herself, in presence of her husband ? ’ Is not that question answered, already ? If you have any further doubts, I will tell you more. I will tell you, that Mr. Flemyng’s assiduities were not unnoticed by me—that I have been for some time aware of his increasing infatuation. If this knowledge did not trouble me then—as I affirm, on my honour, it did not—I am scarce likely to suspect my wife’s honour now. I leave it in her own guardianship—confidently, as I have ever done. And I utterly decline to hold her accountable for the desperation of guilty passion ; whether that desperation be shown in life or death. Mr. Seyton, your character for probity and honour stands so high, that I am bound to hold you incapable of deliberate injustice. I must believe, that in this matter you have followed your notions of

right. But I take leave to tell you that, in speaking of Lady Dorrillon, as you appear to have done, you have gravely and grossly erred: in speaking to her—even as I heard you speak—you have cruelly abused your privileges as an ambassador. For in such a capacity you appear to have come hither. Sir, I return you your credentials.” (He held out the letter with a steady hand.)

“And now, so far as I am concerned—this interview is ended; unless you wish to crave Lady Dorrillon’s pardon, for words uttered in rash excitement. In that case, I shall be happy to intercede for you. If you cannot—or will not—do this, I will pray you to depart, in silence.”

There was over-much of set oratory in all this; added to a certain pomposity of manner. But Seyton was no more inclined to laugh than to be angry. During the last few minutes, his fierce indignation had been tempered by a great pity; the subdued tone showed this.

“I cannot ask any one’s pardon, for having done what I believed to be my duty. But I will trouble you with my presence no more. I have

stayed here too long already; for I have bitter work to do, before I sleep. Sir Marmaduke: I can bear you no malice, for having spoken according to your light. And, Lady Dorrillon—only one more word. I read your name amongst the patronesses of the great Charity Ball that is to come off to-night. Whilst you are dressing for it, will you remember that, about that same hour, I shall have to tell Vincent Flemyng's mother, that her son is lying stiff and cold—murdered by his own hand?"

Without further ceremony, Seyton turned on his heel, and left the room, forthwith.

From the moment that her husband began to speak, Flora's eyes had been bent studiously on the ground: it seemed as though she were determined not to influence him, even by a glance. But when Seyton addressed her thus directly, she looked up; and let her deep earnest gaze rest on his face, till he turned away to depart. In those glorious hazel eyes there dwelt a half-reproachful sadness; such as you might expect to find in those of a meek blameless woman, who—

having been cruelly misjudged and misconstrued—is content that Time, the revenger of all things, should avenge her. Was this all acting?

O fair and patient reader! You may answer that riddle, according to your own sweet fancy.

Sir Marmaduke Dorrillon stood erect upon his feet—never varying a whit that strange rigidity of feature and limb—till Seyton was fairly gone. But, a second or two after the door had closed, that nervous tremor began to possess him again; and suddenly, as if some string had snapped within him, he dropped back into his chair, with a deep hollow groan; pressing both his palms against his brow, whereon that ominous flush still waxed deeper and broader.

To Flora's question—"if he felt ill"—he replied only with an impatient shake of the head. There was silence for a minute or two: then Sir Marmaduke spoke—with a ghastly imitation of his habitual chuckle of self-satisfaction.

"Wasn't that farce well played out; my lady? Why don't you applaud, now it's over? None of

the stage old-men could have done it better. 'I can leave my wife's honour in her own guardianship.'—That was neatly put, I think. If I had had longer notice, I might have made more of that point, though. But—but I was rather taken by surprise."

His tone, all in an instant, lost its bitter irony; and broke down quaveringly.

O my God—my God—that I should have sunk to this—to lie, like a hound, to a brave and honest gentleman, such as he who has just gone out."

His faded blue eyes, that had been dry for many a year, were wet with the big blistering tears of agony and shame.

I think, in all this sad and sinful world, there is no sadder spectacle, than an old man weeping.

Lady Dorrillon was both shocked and surprised; and more moved than she cared to show. She had never spoken to her husband so gently as she did, now.

"I fear this scene has been too much for you or you would not talk in that strain. You took my

part very generously; and I thank you heartily for so doing. I should be sorry, if you cancelled that kindness. You only spoke the simple truth. I can take right good care of my honour, and yours. If you knew all, you would know that you never had less to fear, than from that wretched madman, whom I cannot regret, even as a friend."

The soothing influence of manner and tone that, at any other time, would have acted like a charm were utterly powerless, here. He went on—panting and stammering with passion.

"I *do* know all. At least, I know that he fared no better than the other fools whom you torture for your sport. He had less patience, or more courage, than the rest of us: that's all. Will that prevent his name, and yours, and mine, being bandied about from one scandal-monger to another, for months to come? A pleasant drama they will make of the story that was finished last night. I shouldn't wonder if Halloran wrote a ballad on it. It is time all this should end: it *shall* end, too. I'll go somewhere—anywhere,

to hide myself. And you shall follow, my lady; whether you will or no. Wittol as I am—I've that much of authority left. And I'll use it: I will, by ——."

It was the first oath Sir Marmaduke had ever uttered in his wife's presence.

On all former occasions, Flora had quelled her husband's feeble attempts at rebellion, very quickly and imperiously. But now, she maintained the half-contemptuous forbearance which makes us indulgent to the petulance of fractious childhood.

"You must have taken leave of your senses"—she said. "There is no question of shame. Why should the world be more uncharitable than usual? Nothing is so easily accounted for, as the desperation of gamblers. You confess that I have been faithful—in deed if not in word. What would you have more?"

"Faithful? Faithful to whom?" he retorted, in the same fierce broken tones. "Faithful—not to me; but to a dead man's memory. Did you think your secret was safe from me? I'm not so

blind and deaf, as I seem. Did you never guess how I have hated that man; and envied him, too? I hated him, because he was beyond my reach: if he had been above ground, I would have had his blood, or he should have put me out of pain. I envied him his quiet rest; and—more than all—your visits to his grave. And you dare——”

Flora Dorrillon's bearing changed startlingly, as though she had been touched by some evil enchanter's wand: not a trace of gentleness, or compassion, lingered on her face; and in her eyes glittered the keen cold cruel look of battle. Such a look some, now living, might remember to have seen in her father's eyes, as he took up ground for one of his mortal duels.:

“Stop:” she said in a very low voice. “Stop—if you are wise. You have said words already that I will never forget. I think you are about to say some, that I will never forgive. Rather than have uttered the name that is on your tongue, you will wish, one day, you had bitten it through.”

But the warning, or menace (for it savoured as much of the one as of the other), seemed to give the last spur-stroke to Sir Marmaduke's frenzy.

"Not utter that name?" he shrieked out. "And why should I be more discreet than you have been? Have I not heard you murmur it often enough in your sleep; with the smile of an adulteress on your lips? Not utter it? If these were the last words I should ever speak—I would call down God's curse on Guy Livingstone's memory and on the hour when first you met."

Flora started slightly when that name was pronounced: but betrayed no other sign of emotion, much less of anger. Any passionate outbreak would have been better than the bitter calmness with which she made reply.

"You would not be warned. Now, take the consequences. When I consented to become your wife, did I lead you to expect either love or honour from me? You know right well, it was not so. The falsehood I spoke at the altar, I take on my own soul: to you I told none. You asked me no questions, as to my past life: if you

had done so I should have answered them, frankly, *then*. Now, all is different. But you take credit to yourself, for having surprised my secret ; and, you think, I was careful to guard it ; and should never have betrayed myself, except in dreams ? You shall not have to complain of my reserve in future. You have taunted me with keeping faithful to a memory ? I would have forgiven you even this, if you had not uttered *his* name, and coupled it with a curse. Did I love Guy Livingstone ? I loved him well enough, to have felt more pride in being called his mistress, than ever I have felt in being called your wife ; well enough—to have crouched at his feet, and endured all scorn and cruelty, if I might have hoped for one caress, when he grew weary of tyranny ; well enough—to have blessed him for coming back to me for one day, though others had held him all the rest of the year. He kissed me once—so long ago ! You know that your lips have never touched mine. But you did not know, that no living man has fared better than you ; and never will, I think, till I die. And you have

dared to curse this man in my presence. Sir Marmaduke Dorrillon: ours was always a very simple marriage-contract. It shall be simpler still, from this hour. I am not thinking of open separation. I will do my duty as the mistress of your house as I have hitherto done: and I will visit other people's in your company, when I feel inclined to do so. But, in all other respects, our lives henceforward shall be as much apart, as if I had never borne your name. Before I married you, you promised—"I should have my own way in all things:" it is too late to think of forcing my free-will, now. You will keep up amicable appearances, or make the world a witness of our quarrels, according to your own good pleasure. You say, 'you will take me away, whether I will or no.' You can easily test your authority. I absolutely refuse to leave London, till it suits my convenience."

Her manner was quite composed; and there was no break in the rapid, even flow of her speech; but ever and anon, the shiver of suppressed passion ran through her frame a not

all of angry passion. The same expression that transfigured Flora's face, whilst she gazed on a certain portrait, dwelt on it now, whilst she gloried in the avowal of her sinful love.

Lady Dorrillon had been too much wrapped up in her own thoughts, to notice the effect of her words: otherwise she would surely have paused—in fear, if not in pity.

For a few seconds after his wife began to speak, Sir Marmaduke continued to glare at her, in savage impotent fury; but, ere long, a vague bewildered expression possessed his eyes, which grew strangely heavy and dim. As the last words were spoken, he staggered up to his feet, with a groan plainly indicative of physical agony; and stood erect for an instant, pressing his hand convulsively on his brow once more. With a swift upward surge, the dark red flush mounted even to the roots of the thin grey hair; it vanished almost as quickly; and then a tinge of ashen-grey overspread the wan withered face, over which soon swept a yet more awful change. As Sir Marmaduke collapsed on his chair, with a

dull helpless crash, after one terrible struggle for speech, a child might have read in his distorted features the ghastly sign-manual of Paralysis.

In front of any other calamity, Flora, in the midst of remorse or relenting, would have kept her self-possession. But Death, swift and sudden, would have impressed her far less than this grewsome Death-in-Life. Little as she recked of the simplest precepts of Christianity—so far as following them out in practice went—she was, yet, not an infidel. It seemed to her, that the hand of an angered Providence was actually manifested here; and, with that conviction, came the vague terror of the Unseen, which has caused many sceptics and scoffers to grovel in the dust, since the day when a voice from Heaven spake to certain persecutors, journeying towards Damascus.

As she rushed to the door, her shrieks rang out shrill and wild. Help was near, and came speedily. But, before it came, the last remnant of Flora's hardihood had departed. They found

her kneeling, with her face buried in her hands;  
as though she would shut out the sight and  
sound of the ruin that was chiefly—if not wholly  
—her work.

## CHAPTER XV.

### LAST STROKES OF THE SHUTTLE.

THE Row was busy and beautiful, as it is wont to be, one hour after noon, when the season is at high tide. There was the same charming contrast between the many-hued fringe of summer raiment without the rails, and the moving mass of sombre colour within—the same murmuring music of pleasant voices in the air, broken by distincter notes of laughter-trills—that we have seen and heard so often; and the soft June sky over all.

Many bright troops of amazons marched past, in slow or quick time, that morning: and few came out of the review with greater credit than that especial one, in which Marion Charteris was the most notable figure. She seemed in radiant spirits, and was looking wonderfully well: the

weather, and all other accessories of time and place, were just calculated to set off her peculiar beauty. The eyes of many who knew not her name, followed her as she rode slowly along—halting often, to exchange a nod, a word, or a smile; whilst on the ponderous braids displayed beneath her hat (they *were* her own; for the *chignon*-hypocrisy was not then organised) the sunlight gleamed, as on a globe of burnished copper. Many too could not refrain from envying that favoured cavalier who—however others might come or go—never resigned his post at the Fiametta's bridle-rein. Neither did Denzil Ranksborough seem insensible to the advantages of his position: his manner was, at times, almost animated; and there was apparently no lack of subjects mutually interesting; for their subdued converse never languished for an instant.

The squad, in the van of which these two rode, had nearly reached the eastern extremity of the Row, and were preparing to wheel; when they came abreast of a knot of some half-dozen

men, who had come to a halt under one of the trees, and were talking eagerly and earnestly together. From these Bertie Grenville detached himself, and joined Mrs. Charteris's party.

His countenance was unusually grave and gloomy: before he opened his mouth, it was clear he was laden with evil tidings.

"Have you heard what has happened? Of course, you haven't though. I can guess that, by your faces. Vincent Flemyng committed suicide last night, by poison."

Most of those within hearing were more or less shocked or astounded: from one or two there broke a startled exclamation. Marion Charteris uttered not a word: but Ranksborough saw her cheeks grow deadly pale, whilst she swayed to-and-fro in her saddle, as if suddenly dizzy.

"It's a fearful business"—Bertie went on—"even as it stands. And I think we don't know the worst of it, yet. I won nearly three hundred of poor Flemyng last week. I didn't much expect to get it; for he has been losing awfully of late; and I didn't mean to dun him—that's one

comfort. But, before I was up this morning, a note was left at my lodgings, with the full amount in bank-notes, and his 'compliments' written on the envelope: several other fellows to whom he owed money, got the counterpart of my packet. The next thing I heard was, the news I've just told you. I fancy it will turn out that something else besides his losses drove him to this; unless he was out of his head altogether. Isn't it horrible?"

No one answered: and Ranksborough first broke silence.

"I don't wonder at your being overcome, Mrs. Charteris. You knew him when you were both children, if I remember right. It is shocking enough to hear such news of a mere acquaintance—much more of an old friend."

The considerate intentions of the speaker quite deserved the grateful look which repaid him.

"Yes: a very old friend"—Marion murmured faintly. "His poor mother and sister, too! It is too dreadful to realise. I wish—I wish some

one would take me home. Where is Mr. Bellingham ? ”

The individual in question was a sober elderly cousin, who generally chaperoned Mrs. Charteris in the absence of her husband. He rode forward as soon as his name was mentioned ; and—without another word being spoken—the two departed together. The same moment the group began to break up—to discuss elsewhere the tidings they had just heard—till Grenville and Ranksborough were left alone.

“ It has hit her harder than I thought it would ”—the former remarked, with a significant glance after Mrs. Charteris’s retreating figure. “ I fancied all *that* was over, long and long ago.”

The other’s brow contracted ; but in meditation, it seemed, rather than in anger.

“ So it *was* all over, I believe—” he said very quietly. “ At least, if you mean anything beyond the interest any woman may feel in an old playmate. But you’re pretty right, Cherub, in what you’re thinking about. There’s something more

in this affair than either you or I know of; or ever shall know, perhaps."

"Do you remember—" Bertie asked, after a minute's silence—"do you remember our talk in the smoking-room, the first night we met poor Flemyng; when he seemed so struck with the Dorrillon; and when Mrs. Charteris seemed rather pleased than otherwise, at the turn things were taking. 'I shouldn't wonder if they were both in the same stable—' Hardress said. Cis Castlemaine and I, came nearly to the same conclusion afterwards. Now I'd lay long odds—if it wasn't a shame to bet about such matters—that we should find traces of the Dorrillon's *griffe* in this business, if we could sift it to the bottom. If that is the case, it's only natural that the other should feel rather remorseful: though, of course, neither of them contemplated such a catastrophe. I'm sure *I* didn't; when I talked about 'dropping troublesome people down *oubliettes*.' "

"We shall know more about it some day—" the other remarked, indifferently; as if he did

not care to pursue the subject. "It's the merest guess-work, at present."

But, as Ranksborough rode homewards alone, he pondered on these things, far more gravely than was his wont.

"I really do care to hear all that story, now—" he thought within himself. "There must have been some strong sensational bits before the last act began. I must get the Fiametta to confess *her* share in it, at least."

But, though their Platonic amusements went on prospering long afterwards; and though a familiar intimacy subsists at this very hour; Denzil Ranksborough never has listened to that story; and—I dare swear—never will.

What is yet more remarkable; though Marion and Flora are still fast friends, and are oftener than ever alone together, one name, since that day, has never passed the lips of either—the name of Vincent Flemyng. It may well be, that the first shrinks from full knowledge of the truth, lest she should discover herself to have been the unwitting second-cause of deadly harm;

and the last disdains to share her burden with another ; even though it be the burden of blood-guiltiness.

Before the buzz of wonderment and speculation, caused by the mysterious suicide, had half exhausted itself, fresh game for the scandal-hunters was started. In the course of that same afternoon, it was noised abroad that Sir Marmaduke Dorrillon had been stricken down with mortal sickness, and that there were small hopes of his recovery. Much more general compassion was excited by this second calamity than had been accorded to the other. Vincent Flemyng had very few personal friends, or even intimate acquaintances ; whilst Dorrillon was not only liked by the elders of his own standing, but, to a certain extent, admired by many who looked upon him as a rare specimen of the *Vieille Roche*. Those who had been most severe on his connubial mistake, repented themselves of their witticisms, now ; and recognised the blank that would be created, if the kind courtly old man were to appear in the midst of them, no more.

Nevertheless, Sir Marmaduke's presages, as to the *cancans* that would ensue, were only too fully realised. No woman in broad England could count more enemies than Flora Dorrillon. The ranks of these had gone on swelling ever since her bright baleful star first sparkled in the social firmament; and she had never cared to conciliate a foe; or make compensation for the damages she caused, even by an implied regret. On the foundation of the double catastrophe, it was easy to build up a formidable tower of circumstantial evidence. The matrons and mature maidens who had been injured, more or less directly, by Flora's fatal fascinations or merciless tongue, broke out into vicious jubilation; exulting—after the manner of Elizabeth when proof, or pretext, sufficient, against the prisoner at Fotheringay was found; and the sour-visaged Virgin knew that a fairer, if not wiser, head than her own would soon roll on the scaffold. And each cried to her fellow—

“Awake. Arise. Set on and spare not. Lo, our enemy is delivered into our hand.”

It is not worth while, to enumerate the wild conflicting rumours that got abroad to you, who have heard already the right version of the tale. Bad as things were—the scandal would have spread far more widely, and endured far longer, if it had not been for Castlemaine, and others; men of mark and influence, whom it were not safe to offend. These struck in boldly, to the rescue of their ancient comrade's name—even as Nestor bestrode his fallen brother-in-arms—and held the busy-bodies at bay; partly by ridicule, partly by fear.

But the voices, neither of friend nor foe, passed the threshold of the quiet darkened chamber, where Flora Dorrillon kept sleepless watch whilst her husband lingered on the dim Debateable Ground that divides the frontiers of life and death. The later pictures of this series have, perforce, been somewhat gloomy and unattractive; so there is the less reason for loading more canvas with sombre colours. On this principle I will leave you to imagine the scene at Warleigh, when Seyton had told his terrible news. Mrs.

Flemyng was too much stunned for awhile, to realise what had befallen her: nor has she ever fully recovered from the shock; though she has subsided long since, into a quiet enduring grief, which knows neither paroxysms nor abatement. Almost her first coherent words were——

“ Ah, Tom, you see he *did* mean it after all.”

It was one of the cruel stabs that the gentlest of God's creatures will deal sometimes, when a great grief has marred and warped their nature. From that moment——albeit there never was coldness or constraint between them——Seyton knew that the unhappy mother would always hold him guilty in her heart of harshness and injustice towards her darling. But that knowledge only made him more sedulous in the filial observance with which he tended her.

Mrs. Flemyng never heard of her son's letter to Seyton. She always believed that the verdict of Temporary Insanity was a true one; and that poor Vincent had yielded to the promptings of an over-worked brain—not to any other temptations. Not till long afterwards, did Kate learn

the whole sinful secret: then her husband told her all that had been said and done on that disastrous day; and confessed his own misgivings as to the share he might innocently have had, in hastening the blow that struck poor Marmaduke Dorillon down. Kate said little; and that little in tenderness; but she was almost slower in shaking off the effect of what she then heard, than she had been in recovering from the first horror of her brother's death.

Only by those two women was Vincent Flemyng sincerely and enduringly mourned. Marion Charteris, as has been aforesaid, was possessed by a vague self-reproach; but the ominous Shadow receded farther and farther into the back-ground; till at last, it ceased to haunt her sunny life; or, when it glided past at rare intervals, looked less menacing than mournful. Peradventure, even the dark fortress of Flora Dorillon's heart, could not quite keep out remorse; but against one feeling of regretful tenderness towards the dead it was barred for evermore.

Almost, before the turf was laid over Vincent

Flemyng's head, all others went about their work or play, as if he had never been. Thus it has fared with braver, and wiser, and gentler men; neither, good Master Lycidas, I fear, will better luck attend your worship, or the humble individual who now addresses you.

How long do you really expect rippling circles will break the smoothness of the stream, on which we have been disporting, more or less gracefully, after the last fatal cramp hath seized us, and we shall have gone down into the depths, to sup—let us hope—with Sabrina?

And now—as cheery old Socrates said to the friends who had borne him company through many pages of ponderous parchment—“Courage: for I see land a-head.”

When some few more threads are gathered in, the weaver's work will be done; and the fabric will go forth to be tested by certain cunning chapmen, whom it is not easy to beguile. I suppose the best verdict one ought to expect, would be—“a good ‘fast’ colour; not a very substantial or enduring article, but adapted for summer

wear." As such—and no other—perhaps they will recommend it to their fair and gentle customers.

Yet, of the personages who have figured in this tapestry, little more that is note-worthy is to be recorded.

Brian Maskelyne came back, after long wandering, with the same moody melancholy on him, which he has never entirely shaken off; though he has become less of a recluse of late, and takes his fair share in county-business and field-sports. Nothing would have been easier than to sever himself, by divorce, from the woman who 'laid his honour in the dust.' To the wonder of many, and the scandal of not a few—he has taken no step whatever in this matter. He was also advised to withdraw the large yearly allowance that he had settled on Bessie after their marriage, or to abide a legal decision thereon: but this counsel he rejected very deci-

sively : the only stipulation that he attached to the payment was, that she should cease to bear his name. This condition was very readily accepted by 'Mrs. Daventry,' as she chooses to call herself, now-a-days.

Various motives have been imputed to Brian, to account for this strange forbearance ; and perhaps the chief one he himself would find it hard to define. It may be that, rather than see the base and black treachery paraded again, he prefers to let ill alone. There may also be some vague sense of expiation in all this. You remember that strange fancy of the Fourth James of Scotland ; how—in fasting or in feasting ; wearing silk or steel ; whispering in a lady's ear ; or cheering his hounds through the greenwood ; or shouting his battle-cry—

Suddenly his look would change,  
His cheer o'ercast and lower,  
If in a sudden turn he felt  
The pressure of his iron belt,  
That bound his breast in penance pain  
In memory of his father slain.

So Maskelyne may have thought that, in the

wearing of those galling fetters, he paid some small part of the debt of retribution, incurred, on that night when his mother died—alone.

And, even if Bessie's death were to set him free, it would be very long before Brian would venture to ask any pure and faithful woman to fill the place, that was voided when the sin of the beautiful traitress found her out.

So Daventry and his paramour live in tolerable comfort, if not credit, on the said allowance, and on their own somewhat precarious gains. They may be encountered at most important race-meetings (the lady makes a very fair book on her own account): and more constantly still, at such gatherings on the other side of the Channel. For the pair have little honour in their own country; and Continental society suits Bessie, at least, best: she especially affects Baden. She has hitherto been suffered to roam through the Conversation-halls, unmolested; though the Administration watch her with a jealous eye; and the slightest overt misde-

meanor will bring her under the awful ban of Benazet.

Her familiars of course are chiefly found amongst the magnates of the ring: yet others of higher degree—socially, if not morally, speaking—are often attracted by the splendid insolent beauty, which appears, even now, scarcely to have reached its zenith. It must be owned, that these last pay their court—with a reservation. I heard the youthful Marquis of Athelney express a very just opinion on this subject, nearly two years ago; and one that was probably shared by many of his fellows.

“She’s a devilish handsome woman—” he said; “and ripping good chaff too, I can tell you. Not half bad fun—to sit with her in the shade, and listen to the band. I rather like her to play my money too—she’s better nerve than I have, and better luck—and she’s always welcome to a *rouleau* on her own account. I don’t mind standing supper either, as often as she likes. But, as for her ‘quiet dinners’—not if I know it.”

Therewithal, the beardless but astute aristocrat

smote his nose (which he wears large and imposing, as befits a Count of the Holy Roman Empire), with a wink of intense intelligence; and departed, to get his money on Vermout, without delay.

Of those same quiet dinners, and the quiet *écarté* ensuing, even that bold and usually fortunate gambler, the Vicomte de St. Brélan, has conceived a salutary fear.

“*On m’a plumé, mon ami*” — he averred piteously, whilst recounting the experience of a certain evening—“*plumé, ma parole d’honneur, comme un pauvre chapon de Bresse. J’avais grande envie de dire, avant de partir—‘Madame, votre potage n’était pas mal: mais je le trouve un peu cher.’ Si on me rattrape jamais dans ce guet-à-pens!*”

In truth, wherever that pair may chance to tarry, the cry of ‘Ware Hawk!’ is very soon raised: they must be conscious of this, and the only wonder is, that they carry it off as carelessly. Of the real interior of their *ménage* very little is known; except that Bessie has never been even suspected of infidelity to her paramour; and that

the latter is supposed to treat her kindly, as a rule. Many believe that the balance of power does not now incline to the masculine side; and that the Lawyer is the more easily cowed of the two. It may well be so: for, the longer they live in close contact, the more surely will a dauntless nature assert itself against a craven.

Neither did poor Jem Standen lack care and decent comforts, during the brief remainder of his life; till, one night, he fell asleep in his own crapulous fashion, and so passed into the slumber which is frightened by no dreams. But the days of his daughter's mourning lasted not long; whilst Daventry exulted brutally at being relieved of a cumbersome burden.

Bertie Grenvil still goes gaily and gallantly in front, showing no signs of extraordinary distress, in spite of the terrible severity of the pace. How he and certain of his fellows contrive to ruffle it thus bravely, is a paradox which has puzzled wiser brains than the present writer's.

Some irritated economists are never weary of

lifting up their voices in protest against the social anomaly.

“How is it done?”—the sages ask you, querulously. “Where does the mere ready cash come from? Surely there must be an end to this, before long?”

But somehow, the end, with many of them, is not yet.

The great wind, coming from the East, that smites the four corners of many houses, in which the wealthy ones of the earth are sitting, sweeps harmlessly over the light and lowly tents wherein these reckless Bedouins dwell: when the commercial horizon is dark with clouds, they seem to be basking in a sunny climate of their own: when tempest walks abroad on the face of the financial waters, they might chant, with the old buccaneer—

O, sweet it was in Avès, to catch the landward breeze,  
A-swing, with good tobacco, in a hammock 'neath the trees;  
With a negro lass to fan you; whilst you listened to the roar  
Of the breakers on the bar outside, that never reached the shore.

Only, the hands that rock these modern

marauders to sleep are lily-white ; and faultless in accent are the voices that sing their lullaby.

Nevertheless, without some extraordinary wind-fall or stroke of luck, should avert it, a reckoning-day must come sooner or later ; and the Cherub's must surely be near at hand. Not only must the patience, both of his creditors and his subsidizing relatives, be nearly worn threadbare ; but one or two of his familiar friends have ' gone ' lately. We all know what that portends. When a single pilaster is suddenly removed from the fragile edifice, built up of ' mutual-accommodation ' paper, the others are ill able to support the slight additional strain ; and the grand final crash becomes the merest question of time. True it is, that for this audacious Skimmer of the Sea (we are on the piratical tack, you see, once more) a harbour of refuge—unless rumour lie—is still open, whereunto he may resort, when the cruisers hem him hopelessly in, or when he shall have become weary of roving.

A certain Scottish heiress—the reverse of prepossessing in appearance, but to whom

Fortune has made large amends for the niggardliness of Nature—became helplessly enamoured of the Cherub, long long ago : she has been ready ever since to surrender to his keeping, at a moment's notice, herself and her ample tocher ; and, unless Bertie shall step between her and celibacy, for his graceless sake she will live and die a maid. Friends who grieve over her infatuation, cease not to remonstrate ; match-makers, whose own purposes are thwarted thereby, cease not to distil into her ears venomous versions of that reprobate's misdemeanors : all warnings, whether sincere or interested, are treated with the same placid heedlessness. She can even afford to compassionate Bertie's supposed fellow-criminals, on the ground that—" of course they couldn't help themselves, poor things !" Always with the same grateful humility, she accepts the cold courtesies and constrained attentions that, at rare intervals, he condescends to bestow upon her. Perhaps, with the patient obstinacy characteristic of her nation, she is content to bide her time ; believing that,

sooner or later, she will gain the privilege of ministering to her Suzerain's necessities, if to his affections she may never aspire.

Each day that tall and somewhat angular shadow looms larger and nearer across Grenvil's path; and seems to beckon him forward into a certain avenue, where the vista is closed by an altar.

The wisest of the Cherub's female advisers—he takes counsel with none others—are beginning to see things in this light, and to lecture their *protégé* accordingly. Before the beginning of next season, the chronicler who has to deal with such matters, will “understand that a marriage is on the *tapis*, between a wealthy and accomplished Scotch heiress and a Guardsman well-known in fashionable and sporting circles.” I should not wonder if that ingenious but unfortunate gentleman were—for once—right in his surmises.

Should such be the case—putting Mrs. Malaprop's grand principle aside—the union will probably be better regulated than most alliances, purely conventional on one side. The bride will

certainly not be jealous or exacting ; and Bertie is simply incapable of maltreating any woman whatsoever ; so that in that household a kindly courtesy may well prevail, even if it should never ripen into domestic happiness. But these things are all of the future, and matters of merest augury.

Neither in Marlshire, or on its borders, is there any startling change. The feminine feud betwixt the houses of Brancepeth and Peverell has gone smouldering on, giving out angry flashes at intervalss, but never absolutely bursting into flame. But the influence of the latter family is sensibly abated in the county ; and it is gravely doubted whether, at the next elections, the unpopularity of his wife and son may not be too much weight for Sir Pierce to carry, despite his long and faithful service to the shire. Some vague rumours of such opposition and revolt are supposed to have reached Lady Peverell's ears, and to have chafed her haughty spirit sorely ; for her temper has shown itself terribly often of late, and she watches for cause of offence more

jealously than ever. But none the less hardily does La Reine Gaillarde—aided and abetted by her laughter-loving lieges—make a mock at the grim castellaine of La Garde Douleureuse.

At Warleigh, too, there is still sunshine, as of old; albeit tempered with some light shadows. For Mrs. Flemyng is much there; and in that sad presence, even the children (whom she dotes on, and who are ridiculously fond of her) refrain instinctively from noisy mirth. But the elder ones know, that they are never to mention ‘poor uncle Vincent’s name’; and the younger will, perhaps, never hear it. The bereaved mother knows that she alone, now, clings to that memory, as if it were a holy thing; but not for this does any bitterness mingle with her grief. She is content to hear Kate ‘lilting’ about the house merrily as of old; and she does not begrudge Tom one of his honest pleasures. For she knows that neither of those two would have grudged any possible cost, or trouble, or pain, to have averted calamity from her dead darling’s head; and she quarrels no more with their recovered spirits, than with their

doffing of the mourning, which she herself will change only for her shroud.

Warleigh is a name of more mark now-a-days, than when this tale began. Last year, Frank Braybroke, after many grumblings and misgivings, did positively and finally decide that he was getting too old and heavy for his post. When this determination was found to be unalterable, Marlshire lost no time in looking out for a worthy successor; and the eyes of the whole county turned, as the eyes of one man, towards Seyton.

Tom made some objections at first—"he was a family man, and a farmer to boot; couldn't afford the time, or the money," &c. &c. And Kate shook her pretty head, warningly: but the reluctance of the one and the prudence of the other were the most transparent matters of form. While the mock-debate was in progress, Brian Maskelyne appeared, and all financial scruples vanished before the magnificent subscription—or rather guarantee—that he proffered.

"I'd give more than that, to make you take

the hounds Tom—" he said. " I think, I *should* have some interest in them, then. And my nerve's coming back, I do believe."

That clenched the question, at once—not that it needed much clenching; and the mastership of the M. H. was virtually transferred that very day. They gave dear Frank Braybroke (he abdicated the Squiredom with his other honours) a tremendous dinner; and a colossal piece of plate, under which he sits, on state occasions, like a man under his own vine or fig-tree. When the cloth was removed, and the stock-toasts had been got through, Mr. Braybroke delivered the longest and most ornate oration of his life; at the conclusion of which, he endowed Seyton with his horn and his blessing.

Both of these gifts have thriven remarkably well with Tom, hitherto; and, perhaps, it will not be long before, in the glories of the new Mastership, men forget even the famous Pinkerton run above recorded.

It is rumoured that the Little Lady means to visit Marlshire once again, before the violets are

in bloom: so that buxom Bell Gaysforde will have another chance of proving if she can give all that weight away.

And the bonniest of Kates pursues more sedulously than ever—"by virtue of her position"—she says. But she pursues not alone. For, be the weather fair or foul, there rides always at her side, a sturdy fair-haired little page; "the very moral of his father (all Marleshire avers); and with just Tom's seat;" who was 'blooded' this season, after the first kill in the open.

Over the banquets at Charteris Royal—radiant in beauty and in royalty of apparel—the Fiametta still presides. She has not entirely lost the frank audacity and merry wilfulness, which were ever amongst her chiefest charms. She will flirt—as Flora Dorrillon said—"tomorrow, and next day, and to the very end of her time." But her coquetries are tempered, now, by a certain discretion and reserve; she never again will flutter so near to flame, as to risk the singeing or smirching of her brilliant wings. Be-

sides, she has become, of late, very fond of her eldest-born—a handsome, graceful boy—who, morally not less than physically, takes after his impulsive mother, rather than his stolidly respectable sire. John Charteris plods on his decent blameless way, with the placid contentment and self satisfaction of one, over whose head a great peril has passed, unawares. But the match-making cousin, to whom Marion owed her matrimonial promotion, finds an intense relief in the improved state of things: the good lady had occasionally been tormented with fearful misgivings as to the wisdom of her choice: now she points to the result thereof with a pardonable pride.

Of Blanche Ellerslie there is nothing further, at present, to tell. The proceedings of that dangerously discreet little person never did make much noise in the world; but, from marauders of her stamp, no news are often bad news; so that it is probable we shall hear, ere long, of further damage, done within bow-shot of her modest dwelling.

Lastly : how fares it with *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* ?

In truth, that question may not easily be answered. She has withdrawn herself almost entirely from general society, of late ; and people have grown tired of assigning reasons for this seclusion. Assuredly, it is not that she shrinks from encountering the scandal she provoked ; for Flora's bitterest enemies can only call her—over-bold. The weary disgust, and satiety of triumph, which have caused some of the most ruthlessly ambitious of human kind to lay down an ill-gotten sceptre, and pass away into obscure abdication, may have something to do with it. Also it is not impossible, that the remorseful terror which overcame her, when she saw her husband paralysed at her feet, may abide with her yet. Certain it is, that since that fatal day, she has done much to make up her long arrears of wifely duty.

All her care and tendance are greatly needed ; for, though Sir Marmaduke has recovered, beyond the expectations of his most sanguine physician,

he is still—and must ever be—a mere moral and physical wreck. The words that burst from his lips in the frenzy of jealous passion were dreadfully prophetic: they *were* the last he ever did speak—intelligibly. Yet, in spite of his infirmity, the old man is probably happier than he has been since his unlucky marriage. He is never querulous or irritable, whilst his eyes can rest upon Flora; when she arranges his cushions, or performs any other trifling kindly office, you may see a faint light of grateful pleasure dawn on the poor stricken face; and now and then he will venture to raise her fingers to his lips (only one hand is quite helpless) with something of his ancient courtly air.

But—supposing that Flora is moved, now, by a real remorse; a remorse that will outlast the precarious life that she helps to prolong—will it so far avail as to bring peace at the last? There is no question of theology here. I simply doubt, whether late and half-enforced repentance can ever, in this world of ours, so atone for long misdoing, as to appease an awakened conscience.

Do you remember some of the noblest lines in that masterpiece of verse, that ought to be set in the balance against the many poetical sins of this our age?

They tell, how Guinevere looked forth through the convent casement, to gain one last glimpse of the generous husband who had just shriven and forgiven her. There, below in the court, he sat on his war-horse, amidst the nuns.

And while he spake to these his helm was lowered,  
To which for crest the golden dragon clung  
Of Britain ; so she did not see the face  
Which then was as an angel's ; but she saw,  
Wet with the mists and smitten by the lights,  
The Dragon of the great Pendragonship  
Blaze, making all the night a steam of fire.

Ah me ! I wonder how many penitents, since that fairest one of all, looking forth into the dark misty future, have seen—not the kind forgiving face—but only the crest of The Serpent ?

THE END.

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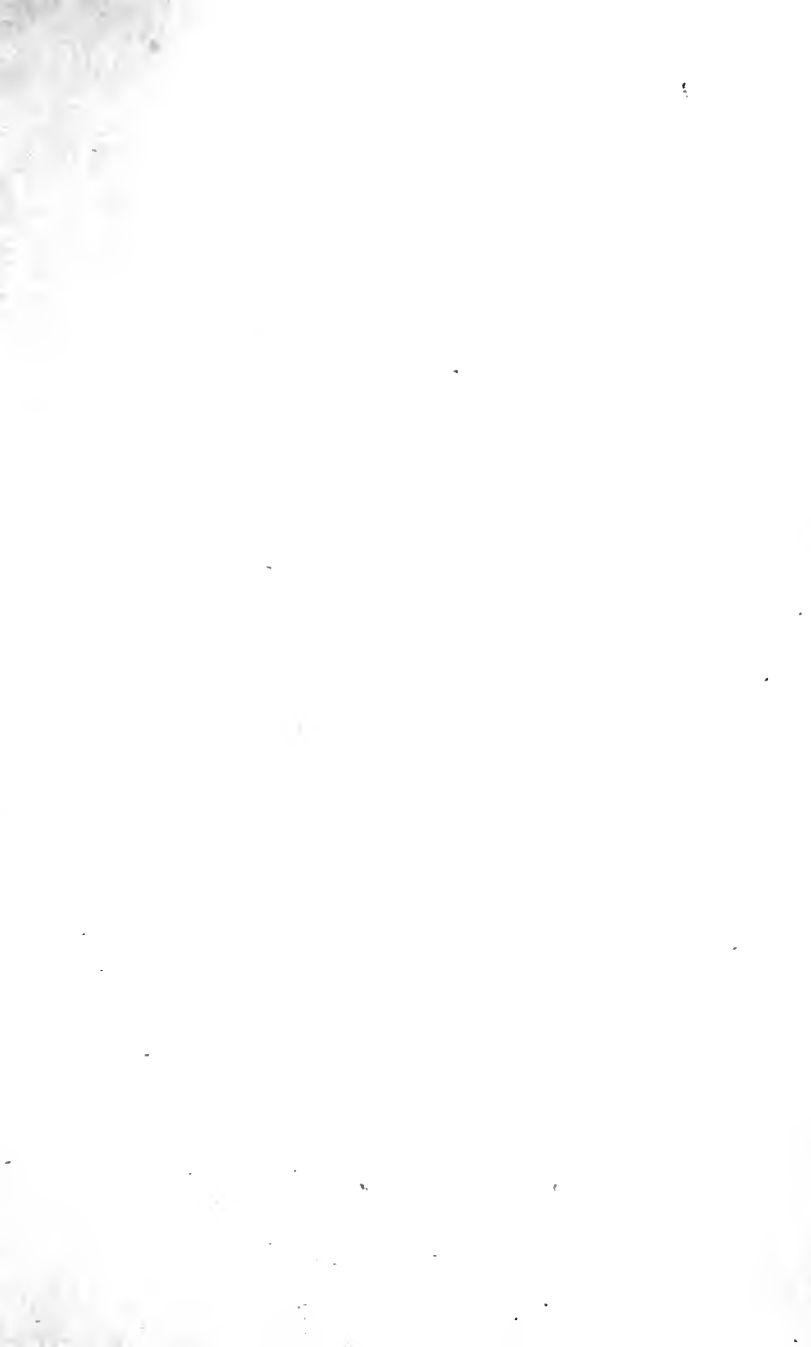
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